



Refashioning the Novel in the Age of Image Media

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Refashioning the Novel in the Age of Image Media

A dissertation presented

by

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to

the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how the contemporary French novel is responding to television. While much has been written regarding the threat that television poses to books, narrative, and language, the survival strategies of writers have been largely overlooked. Rather than lamenting the novel's decline, this study asks how writers are rethinking the purpose and form of the novel to better represent televisual subjectivity and to adapt the genre to a new cultural paradigm. Contemporary novelists must negotiate a tension between distinguishing the novel from the medium of television while also integrating their work into mainstream culture in order to remain relevant. How can the novel both rival television and borrow from it?

Television's effects on sense-making, self-hood, language, and ethics challenge the novel to stretch its limits and create new forms. What does it mean to process the world televisually? How does the information network alter traditional notions of identity? By examining a variety of contemporary French novels (Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Télévision*, Frédéric Beigbeder's *99 francs*, Y.B.'s *Allah superstar*, Amélie Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique*, and Chloé Delaume's *J'habite dans la télévision*), this dissertation traces a short but dynamic history in media culture: television evolved rapidly in France between 1997 and 2006, and each of the five works discussed here responds to different forms of televisual media. What emerges is a window onto the way that television altered consciousness at the turn of the twenty-first century, as well as the way it refashioned the novel.

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Introduction

Much as academics lament the crisis in the humanities or the challenge posed by digital technology to traditional arts, change has always been a constant in literature. Disruptions in thought brought about by political unrest, technological innovation, or scientific discovery have produced some of the most interesting and innovative works of literature. Literature, like many social institutions, needs to be challenged, questioned, and threatened in order to maintain its vibrancy. Serious readers do not seek comfort or reassurance from their books – they seek crisis, because it is crisis that defines our values and helps us to make sense of our lives.

I was initially drawn to the question of how the novel responds to television because television epitomizes the literary crisis: its form of representation competes directly with the novel in terms of audience, epistemological framework, rate of consumption, and immediacy. It is an undeniable fact that as people spend more time in front of the television, they spend less time reading. They also process information differently, structure their thoughts “televisually”, and adopt the language of their favorite programs. How can the novel remain relevant in this new cultural paradigm?

Fortunately, there has been a recent shift in considering literary responses to image media, one that favors the theory that change and crisis are necessary and productive. Whereas the former analysis (exemplified by Alvin Kernan’s *The Death of Literature*, John Ellis’ *Literature Lost*, or Andrew Delbanco’s *The Decline and Fall of Literature*) emphasized the novel’s vulnerability as an aging medium struggling for survival in an age that favors speed and visual stimuli, there is now a greater interest in the way that literature is refashioning itself to remain current in a heavily mediatized,

digital culture. There seems to be little to gain from bemoaning the low levels of readership as the Internet, video games, and television crowd the mediascape. Pessimistic critiques that predict the end of printed literature ignore the exciting ways that literary works, and the novel in particular, are rethinking their form and purpose.

This study investigates how the contemporary French novel is responding to media transformations, and specifically television. The responses are really survival strategies – television represents a rival for the novel in that readers are increasingly becoming telespectators whose limited leisure time is spent in front of a screen rather than a book. The competition from image media is measured not only in the way that individuals allocate their time but also in the way that television guides popular culture. Whereas philosophers and writers were once celebrities whose image was recognizable by the ordinary citizen, that sort of attention is now predominantly awarded to movie stars and television actors. The question that the novelists in this study are asking is how the novel can maintain its viability in an increasingly crowded mediascape.

Survival strategies are the result of novelistic self-reflection: writers must reassess what the novel does as a medium and how it differs from its rivals. In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe how the appearance of a new media causes old media to become aware of its own mediation. Rather than being a transparent means of representation or mimesis, a medium comes to embrace its opacity, the manifestation of its presence as a medium. For Frederic Jameson, this consciousness of even traditional arts as media is a salient characteristic of postmodernism. He writes, “[the traditional fine arts] now come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system in which their

own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question” (*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 162). In the case of literature, this entails considering how language and the process of writing and reading constitute a fundamentally different experience from that of watching a movie or surfing the web. What is it that makes books special, and what do they offer that other media do not? The slowness of the novel, for example, lends itself to deeper meditation on complex issues than does a fragmented, fast-paced sound byte on a news show. This essential characteristic of the novel allows it to brand itself as a more thoughtful, nuanced form where issues of social and political magnitude can be discussed, thereby giving the novel a role that cannot be fulfilled by television.

Survival strategies are also produced by looking outward and asking how literature can refashion itself in order to better represent new forms of subjectivity produced by digital and image media. Because television and the Internet change the way that we perceive reality, literature must find new ways of adapting to the way that readers process text and the world around them. Television introduces an altogether different paradigm of sense-making. Raymond Williams describes the format of television as “flow”, a way of integrating diverse types of programming into a seamless whole (*Television: Technology and Cultural Form*). Describing the experience of watching television would, according to Williams, be like “trying to describe having read two plays, three newspapers, three or four magazines, on the same day that one has been to a variety show and a lecture and a football match. And yet in another way it is not like that at all, for though the items may be various the television experience has in some important ways unified them” (89). As some of the novels discussed in this study

demonstrate, the experience of flow imprints itself onto consciousness, creating a montage or associative style of thinking that incorporates ideas from various sources while maintaining thematic coherency. By putting this process on display in its narrative, the novel gives its readers access to the workings of the televisual mind while also adapting its own narrative style to contemporary subjectivity.

Survival strategies can also be the result of asking how language – the very material of literary works - is changing in an increasingly fast-paced and digital environment. The novel's attention to language allows it to reflect on how this essential form of communication is being altered by economic and social transformations. The life-cycle of trends is accelerating; as Gilles Lipovetsky writes in *The Empire of Fashion*, the logic of the commercial economy drives individuals to disregard eternal, static values in favor of the ephemeral present (134). We seek novelty and immediacy in our purchases, but also in our speech. The references that permeate conversation anchor language in the moment; the effects of digital media are evident in the rate with which a popular topic turns into "old news". For the novel, this entails finding ways to make the written work topical and relevant despite the fact that the process of writing and publishing (at least in print) results in a product that is inevitably deferred vis-à-vis the immediacy of live television. Some of the novels in this study employ a colloquial register that emphasizes the contemporary voice, one attuned to the latest fashion in language and culture. The era of the eternal novel, written with the hope of surviving for posterity, is currently being challenged by the desire of writers to respond to the present. While the nineteenth-century writer Stendhal may have famously been rediscovered and

appreciated a hundred years after he first published his novels, this is unlikely to be the case for these recent works, which are clearly addressed to their contemporaries.

Survival strategies involve embracing the novel's difference – its slowness, its deferral, its intellectualism – while also adapting the novel to the format and language of image media. While it makes sense to emphasize how the novel is unique and fulfills a role that other media cannot, isolating it from media culture would entail alienating it from readers who are deeply immersed in televisual programming. There is a fine line between asserting the novel's usefulness and denigrating the mass media landscape that largely defines mainstream culture. The first novel studied here, Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Télévision*, questions whether the novel can isolate itself from the cultural force of television without seeming ridiculous. As this study will show, novelists negotiate a tension between asserting their medium's exceptional qualities and appealing to a readership that identifies with televisual culture.

Though the conclusions drawn from this study may be useful in examining other national contexts, France provides an ideal cultural setting for examining crises related to media transformations. French writers are steeped in a very public and ongoing debate about how image media is changing traditional values. Many of the theorists and intellectuals who have left the greatest imprint on media theory are French: Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gilles Deleuze. Whereas media theorists in the United States are arguably on the fringes of popular culture, French theory has permeated the public sphere, and it manifests itself visibly in popular novels. The novels studied here allude to media theory directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously. French attitudes toward technology are driven by what Americans would

consider to be academic thinkers, and this integration of theory into the public discussion creates a rich setting for writing fiction.

Much of this theoretical underpinning reflects an ambiguity or outright hostility to new media, and television in particular. The accelerating pace of life, increased influence of American culture, and growth of consumerism that have accompanied the introduction of new media threaten to displace the traditional values that define French exceptionalism. It is not technology in itself that poses a threat, but rather the economic and social structures that it creates. Television in its current form is heavily connected to advertising and consumerism, not to mention a surfeit of American programming that has displaced the domestic broadcasting of early government-controlled French television. A distinctive French identity is being compromised as viewers increasingly identify with the values of foreign programs. As Ruth Cruickshank writes in her introduction to *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*,

French responses to neoliberalism and its perceived role in the ongoing set of processes of globalization (the parallel enlargement of a world marketplace and of worldwide communications systems dominated by audiovisual and digital mass media and information technology) are epitomized by increasingly urgent, sometimes contradictory, and typically anti-American discourses. (2-3)

France fears being subsumed by global influence and sacrificing its socialist values in the process. Television acts as a cultural colonizer; as the influence of traditional social institutions such as the church, community groups, and the family declines, mass media fill the void and displace one's connection to the local community.

Characterizing television as a foreign influence that penetrates the safe and comfortable sphere of what was formerly the great French nation-state explains the recurring theme of "invasion" in the discourse surrounding televisual influence. The

ubiquity of new media as well as their ability to penetrate the private domain of one's home or even the intimate boundaries of the body inspire an overwhelming feeling of violation. The distinction between the private and the public sphere is crumbling, as Jean Baudrillard warns in *The Ecstasy of Communication*:

Now this opposition is effaced in a sort of *obscenity* where the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media (the Loud family in the United States, the innumerable slices of peasant or patriarchal life on French television). Inversely, the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen (all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film): all this explodes the scene formerly preserved by the minimal separation of public and private, the scene that was played out in a restricted space, according to a secret ritual known only by the actors. (130)

Baudrillard's hyperbolic rhetoric epitomizes for many the violence with which television and mass media are destroying the intimate, the sacred, and the private. The intrusion of television into private life is as obscene as pornography, exceeding the limits of propriety that once protected the inner life from the outer life, the intimate from the public.

The invasive nature of television can also be explained by looking at the outsized role that this medium plays in the lives of many French citizens. The average French person watched three hours and forty-six minutes of television per day in 2013 (Sallé). This is considerably more than the two hours and forty-eight minutes that the average American spends in front of the television¹. For many French households, television structures the rhythm of the day, provides a source of entertainment or background noise during dinnertime, and serves as a defining link between individuals and the greater world. For critics of television, the time and attention allotted to this medium is alarming.

¹ <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>

There is a wealth of theoretical thought on the topic of television, ranging from the speed of televisual transmission (Paul Virilio) to how the format of television impedes intellectual thought (Pierre Bourdieu). There are also several noteworthy books on the topic of literary crisis – whether the book will survive or perish as a form of representation given the availability of competing media. There is not, however, a great deal of writing addressing how the novel is changing in response to television. How are writers writing differently given that the television is such an important element in the cultural fabric? The 2008 edition of the journal *Yale French Studies* brings to the forefront the impact of visual culture in contemporary literature. “Writing and the Image Today” begins a broad conversation that invites closer examination of specific genres and authors in relation to particular image media.

I have selected five novels that overtly address television: Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *La Télévision* (1997), Frédéric Beigbeder’s *99 francs* (2000), Y.B.’s *Allah superstar* (2003), Amélie Nothomb’s *Acide sulfurique* (2005), and Chloé Delaume’s *J’habite dans la télévision* (2006). With the possible exception of Y.B., all of these novelists are familiar staples on the French literary scene. While they are not all French (Toussaint and Nothomb both reside in their home country of Belgium), their readership is primarily based in France and their works are in direct conversation with French social and literary currents. Each of these novels is concerned with the novel’s survival in televisual culture, and each one offers a different strategy for how to resist or adapt to the changing mediascape.

As this study will show, the novelists represent a wide variety of styles and attitudes. Toussaint is commonly seen as a minimalist writer published by the prestigious

Editions de Minuit, and his novels are characterized by a focus on everyday life, uncertainty, and enigmatic characters. I classify Beigbeder by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel's term "novels of the contemporary extreme", works that feature reactions to hyperreality, political extremism, and ethical transgression. Y.B. is a politically engaged author writing in the postcolonial tradition who concentrates on the status of French Beurs. Amélie Nothomb is a popular novelist whose work combines elements of gothic and grotesque, while Chloé Delaume is an experimental writer addressing a select academic readership. The question of how television affects the novel thus courses through various genres, and it is my intention to show a diversity of novelistic responses rather than to offer an overarching thesis that would encapsulate all contemporary French novels. Bringing these works together also enables the reader to contrast the survival strategies of a more popular novel (*Acide sulfurique*) with that of an experimental work (*J'habite*), or to consider the unique authorial position that would lead one writer to present a more conservative view of social change (Toussaint) while another argues for a radical break with the past (Y.B.).

Within the chapters, I draw attention to the public identity of these writers, because in many cases their auras haunt readers' experience of their works. Frédéric Beigbeder and Amélie Nothomb are literary celebrities with characteristic writing styles and ideologies. Beigbeder leads a public campaign in favor of defending literature against the onslaught of image media, promoting reading and writing through such enterprises as the Prix de Flore, a prize awarded to young French writers, and his published commentary on other literary works (*Dernier inventaire avant liquidation*). Nothomb's readers follow her work, eagerly anticipating her annual publication of a new

novel and expecting to encounter familiar characters and themes in her writing. Chloé Delaume has also created a fan base by producing a series of experimental novels, many of them engaging questions of subjectivity and virtuality. The hypothetical death of the author is further challenged by the fact that two of these works (*99 francs* and *J'habite*) portray the lives of their writers, making it impossible to dissociate the work from its creator.

The extent to which many of these writers rely on the media to publicize their work and enhance their self-image problematizes their televisual critique and leads to important questions regarding the novel's survival strategies. Should the novelist create a public persona that draws attention to his or her work, or should the novel eschew the media spotlight in order to be seen as a serious genre? What should we make of novelists who exploit television to increase their popularity, yet criticize it in their written works? These questions return to the essential ambivalence between distinguishing the novel from television (and thereby preventing contamination) and adapting the novel to an evolving media landscape. In the case of *Acide sulfurique*, I argue that the novel's satire of reality television is compromised by the fact that Nothomb's novels are implicated in the same ethics of spectacle as that found in the target of her critique. The novel is caught in a culture whose paradigm is increasingly televisual, and this situation encourages the novel to interact with television in a way that sometimes undercuts its desire to avoid it.

The novels are featured in chronological order, and I hope to show that they capture the evolution of television and the changing attitudes toward it. *La Télévision* describes television in a different way than does *J'habite*, and much of this is due to the

tremendous change in this particular medium. In the last few decades, France has experienced a televisual revolution. While in 2000 the vast majority of French households relied on seven analog channels available via terrestrial distribution, by 2009 over seventy percent of households had access to digital broadcasting (Kuhn, *The Media in Contemporary France*, 47). Programming has become more diversified and more competitive, with dozens if not hundreds of channels vying for the viewer's attention. In Delaume's case, the digitalization of television brings it into the realm of electronic information, where it is seen not only as a visual medium but also one that functions as a component in the data network.

The novels here thus cover an evolution in technological history, tracing the emergence of cable television, the rising influence of American programming, and the entry into digital broadcasting. For American readers long accustomed to commercial cable television, this rapid transformation in the content and form of French television is difficult to grasp. And yet the historical period covered here is truly a bridge between two very different eras: one in which engaging with image media was an individual choice to one in which image media is ubiquitous and unavoidable. *La Télévision* (1997) defines television as an isolated instrument that one can choose to turn on or off, while *J'habite* (2006) treats it as an element in the interconnected web of digital technology. In a decade of time, the French mediascape altered dramatically.

One genre of programming whose popularity and influence have generated tremendous interest and debate is reality television, which has redefined the medium and currently represents many of the most popular programs in France. *Big Brother* made its French debut in 2001, raising questions regarding privacy, voyeurism, and the line

separating reality from illusion. Reality television epitomizes for many the strengths and vices of the medium as a whole – an emphasis on affect, particularity, and immediacy. It is also another example of televisual invasion, both in its violation of privacy and in its foreign origins – *Big Brother* is an international franchise with Dutch roots, modeled on similar shows in the United States. This particular genre is central to two of the novels in this study, *Acide sulfurique* and *J'habite*.

Historical change has also affected the way that French society views television: *99 francs* deals with the augmenting wealth of the advertising industry, a fact that is not taken for granted in a country where television was for many years free of advertising content and whose private sponsorship was later heavily regulated (Kuhn, *The Media in France*). *Allah superstar* addresses the mediascape of post-9/11 France, where representation of minorities on television is a significant political topic. *J'habite* portrays television as a component in the information network, transmitting data and drawing viewers into its virtual web. Television has not remained static as a medium, and each novel responds to a different entity in its televisual critique. Because television is entangled in many social institutions, it can reflect concerns relating to globalism, national ideology, or scientific management. Each author presents a slightly different interpretation of what television is and does, and these views are tied to historical context.

Many of these novels emphasize their own attention to history by directly engaging with their immediate political and economic realities. *99 francs* cites facts and statistics to paint a portrait of the global economy at the turn of the century. Its apocalyptic conclusions are reminiscent of what Sabine Van Wesemael refers to as *fin de siècle* anxiety (*Michel Houellebecq*, 34). Beigbeder reacts to the decadent mores that

characterize life in western societies by featuring prostitution, drugs, greed, violence, racism, and misogyny in his narrative. *Allah superstar* responds to the racism and discrimination that manifested themselves following the attacks on the Twin Towers. It captures the frustrations of a young Beur who attempts to integrate into French culture by adopting the few roles available to his ethnicity: that of a comedian and a terrorist. *J'habite* is a product of the Information Age, interrogating networks of data transmitted via the television and relying on the database to structure its narrative. These works capture their social and intellectual climate in a way that requires an attention to history.

There are several guiding themes that can be traced throughout the novels studied. The first is the Anxiety of Obsolescence, the fear that the novel is being superseded by other media. I rely heavily on Kathleen Fitzpatrick's analysis of this topic, and particularly her suspicion that this apprehension about the novel's future may conceal a desire to maintain the status quo for white males who have traditionally dominated the literary and cultural sphere. Television and other mass media are democratic in nature, appealing to a wide variety of groups rather than targeting a specific, elite audience (as many serious works of literature arguably do). The decline of the novel correlates to the rise of a more diverse, egalitarian culture that celebrates values distinct from those of the literary elite. As Fitzpatrick writes, "The focus on the shifts in contemporary cultural life produced by new media developments is at times employed to obscure other, unspeakable anxieties about shifts in contemporary *social* life that pose a lesser threat to the dominance of the novel than to the hegemony of whiteness and maleness long served by the structures of traditional humanism" (201-202). Is it mere coincidence that the two novels in this study that do not seem affected by the Anxiety of Obsolescence happen to

be written by female authors? Y.B., of Algerian origin, also does not seem to vilify television as a medium and focuses instead on the cultural discourse communicated via its programming. Fitzpatrick draws attention to what is at stake for the novelist in producing his or her media critique.

Fitzpatrick also argues that novelists haunted by the Anxiety of Obsolescence do not necessarily lament being marginalized by a culture that they view as unsophisticated and mentally anesthetized. Stressing the outsider status of the novel emphasizes its unique intellectual purview. In fact, the depiction of television in many of these works misrepresents the medium in order to limit its complexity and, by contrast, heighten the superiority of the novel. As Fitzpatrick writes,

In writing about the visual threat to writing, the novelist of obsolescence is able to create a cultural preserve, a protected distance from the contemporary that grants to writing important powers of political resistance. By delineating the epistemologies of text and image, and by repeatedly pointing to the dangers that the image ostensibly presents to a literate culture, the novelist of obsolescence is able to reclaim the primacy of text. (102)

It is important not to accept the televisual critique in these novels at face value, and to instead ask how the portrayal of television speaks to the function of the novel as its counterpoint. For example, if the television in *Allah superstar* blinds Kamel to his status as a postcolonial subject, then the novel is a way to regain one's political and historical consciousness. While the television industry in *99 francs* manipulates the consumer, the novel is by contrast a form free from commercial sponsorship and thus more honest and authentic in its message.

It is equally important to consider the novels that do not suffer from the Anxiety of Obsolescence. *Acide sulfurique* and *J'habite* show little concern for the novel's waning status, and they refrain from juxtaposing reading and watching television as two

antithetical activities. In these two novels, the text borrows from television, integrating the ideology of spectacle (in Nothomb's novel) and the structure of information networks (in Delaume's). The similarities between the two mediums are put into relief: for Nothomb, both the novel and reality TV cater to the desire for voyeurism and spectacle. For Delaume, both television and novel produce virtual subjectivity that allows for transformation and surpassing the limitations of embodied experience. Could the attraction to television in these two later works signal the end of the Anxiety of Obsolescence in favor of a more collaborative attitude between media?

Another guiding theme is that of reality and illusion. Visual electronic media have long been thought to distance spectators from the real world. Guy Debord coined the now familiar term *la société de spectacle* in 1967, arguing that “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (1). The mediation of human experience by screens has social and ethical repercussions – theorists such as Baudrillard consider spectators to be so divorced from real experience that they cannot distinguish representation from reality. For Paul Virilio, the Gulf War was mediatized to such an extent that the public considered it to be a virtual performance rather than a real event. He writes, “The Gulf War is inseparable from its cathodic framing, to the point where it only subsists afterward in the memory of those video cassettes now on sale alongside war games and the Nintendo series” (*A Landscape of Events*, 24). In the effort to traverse space and time via virtual media, individuals have disconnected from the gravity of real-world events. This seeming loss of the Real creates a strong urge to regain it, particularly through the use of violence. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard argues that the attacks on the World

Trade Center might be “responding to this pathetic demand for reality” (75). The ubiquity of representation drives a desperate hunger to regain a sense of direct, immediate, visceral experience.

Is the novel able to pierce through the simulacra of television and revive the sensation of material, embodied reality? How could a medium that is by definition symbolic be somehow closer to reality than a medium that features recorded footage of real events and people? Televisual simulacrum offers an interesting target for the novel’s critique because print fiction does not in fact rival reality or substitute for it. The mediation of literature is so overt, it is so hypermediated (to use a phrase from Bolter and Grusin), that it fails to produce simulacra in the sense of threatening the distinction between the “true” and the “false”, the “real” and the “imaginary” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 3). In his book *Why Fiction?*, Jean-Marie Schaeffer highlights this distinction between the ludic feint of written fiction and that of simulacra, which he terms “serious feint”:

The situation of ludic feint thus distinguishes itself profoundly from that of serious feint. In this last case the function of mimemes is to deceive the beliefs, that is, the conscious instant that regulates our direct interactions with reality; in the fictional device their function is to engage the representational attitude (perceptive or linguistic-semantic), it being understood that shared feint implies that we know that it is a matter of mimemes, a knowledge that stimulates the specific usage that it is advisable to make of the universe generated by this representational attitude. (131)

The overt representational attitude communicates an authenticity in that literature, unlike television, makes no pretense to dissimulating or substituting for reality. The linguistic system, unlike that of images, manifests its representational quality in that words are symbols. Whereas language is overtly semiotic, images can fool the spectator into believing that they are mimetic.

These novels direct the reader's attention to representation and mediatization, both in their critique of television and their own self-reflection. They encourage *looking at* the medium as opposed to merely *seeing through* it (Lanham). These are not immersive texts that seek to lose the reader in their stories; instead, we are constantly asked to reflect on the unique way that literature represents through language. This is both a thematic and a structural theme: many of the narrators are also professional writers who consciously think about language, and the texts draw attention to their opacity as forms of representation. *99 francs* and *J'habite* highlight their literary representation in their paratextual elements and experimental structure: *99 francs* alternates between pronouns in its narrative voice, beginning with *je* and ending with *ils*, stressing the grammatical structure that comprises the novel's linguistic foundation. Delaume plays with various narrative forms and employs letters, formal documents, lists, and an affidavit to tell her story; the reader is attentive to the constructed nature of her writing. As Bolter and Grusin point out, acknowledging the medium's status as a medium heightens its authenticity – unlike certain televisual programs that claim to reflect an immediate, unmediated experience of reality, the novel is stressing its means of representation.

Whereas television supposedly divorces spectators from the real world, these novels seek to engage with the reader's reality. *99 francs*, *Allah superstar*, and *J'habite* address the reader in the second person pronoun, enforcing the feeling that the novel speaks directly to the experience of its audience. Many of the novels also cite real-world political and economic events, anchoring themselves in their historic moment and involving literature in broader social concerns. If simulacra is by definition

representation without a referent, then these works highlight their dialogue with the real world in order to distinguish themselves from it and challenge the idea that novels present mere stories about imagined characters. These are not “narcissistic narratives” absorbed in their own reflection, but rather works that seek to establish a connection between literature and its extradiegetic context. The reader is recognized as a politically and socially engaged individual; when *Allah superstar* and *99 francs* confront the reader directly, they ask him or her to consider the interests and ideologies behind television’s seductive images in order to generate a *prise de conscience* leading to change. These fictions bear markers of reality and ask that the reader translate his or her literary experience into real-world action.

In reinforcing the link between the written word and reality, several of these novels also stretch the conventions of fiction, creating hybrid forms that integrate the essay and autobiography. *99 francs* and *J’habite* constitute works of autofiction that blend imagined narrative with the author’s own lived experience. Despite the fantastic nature of some of the scenes in these novels, the reader senses that the voice speaking to him or her is real, and that the imagined elements in the narrative convey a literary truthfulness that more accurately represents the author’s point of view. These two novels also incorporate reality into their stories by citing facts and documents that support their claims. Beigbeder and Delaume insist on highlighting the relevance and factuality of their stories, leading them to present works that fluctuate between reality and fiction, message and poetics.

The third major theme to consider is that of ethics. Much has been said concerning the vulgarity, violence, misogyny, and discrimination of televisual content,

particularly in France where debates surrounding television have inspired “moral panics” concerning the integrity of French values (Biltereyst, 96). Literature also has its fair share of shocking and unsavory content, and thus the content is not what is at stake in my discussion. Instead, it is the structure of television as a medium that is on trial and to which literature reacts. How does television, regardless of its content, inspire apathy and disengagement? How does the novel counteract the ethically anesthetizing effects of televisual exposure?

The first aspect to consider is the dynamic between spectators and the programming that they consume: television creates a distance between the viewer and what appears on the screen, resulting in a deadened sense of responsibility for real events packaged as entertainment. Televiewers consider themselves to be observers of events rather than taking an active part in them. As Joyce Nelson explains, the television flattens and contains the events that it represents: each image has equal importance, whether it be the weather-related catastrophe broadcast on the evening news or the light-hearted sitcom (*The Perfect Machine*, 43). The television also manages and subdues its images by framing them in a familiar, neat box and presenting even the most shocking and horrendous content in a way that makes it banal and non-threatening. The result is that it is impossible to distinguish urgent crises from entertainment – whether it be political unrest, social injustice, or human catastrophe, the televiewer consumes the news as spectacle. The suffering of others loses its ethical resonance once it becomes a televised image. This is the televisual critique featured in *Acide sulfurique*, and it plays a prominent role in the other novels’ desire to rouse the reader to action and engage him or her in the events described.

Assuming that the television does in fact transform urgent, catastrophic events into spectacle (the Gulf War is again emblematic of this phenomenon), the novel redefines itself as a medium that reconnects the reader to the distant event and emphasizes his or her agency. *99 francs*, *Allah superstar*, *Acide sulfurique*, and *J'habite* enact scenes where an individual performing on the screen addresses the viewer directly, thereby breaking down the simulacrum of representation. The public is stirred from its comfortable place in the audience and asked to participate in the spectacle. Even *La Télévision*, despite its ironic and playful tone, asks whether an individual could step away from televisual ubiquity in order to regain a sense of place and community. There seems to be a revival of *littérature engagée*, in that several of these writers call for the reader to make serious changes in his or her attitude and behavior.

The structure of television also leaves little room for in-depth analysis and confirms prevailing ideologies in an effort to attract the largest possible viewership. Bolter and Grusin point out that television is immediately responsive to cultural demand, avoiding perspectives that would create discomfort or offend its audience (187). While this may be changing somewhat as the number of cable channels proliferate (one could imagine a channel devoted to expressing minoritarian views, for instance) it is largely the case that television is a business that relies on commercial support and ratings for its survival, making it difficult to present views that run counter to public taste. Television also tends to favor affective or condensed content; Bolter and Grusin argue that “a consistent and prolonged point of view required for analysis or reflection is incompatible with televisual immediacy” (189). Though television was not always structured this

way², and one could counter with examples of slow, meditative programming (often found on public access channels), the great bulk of mainstream, popular television, that with the largest audiences and the most cultural influence, is fast, condensed, and dramatic. The result is a superficial or easily digestible portrayal of the world that largely affirms what the mainstream audience already believes and enjoys.

This view of television invites the novel to present itself as a forum for intellectuals, a place where arguments concerning political and social ethics can be discussed thoughtfully and with nuance. The lengthy format of the novel allows it to analyze social problems and to present contradictions and paradoxes that are often missing from the condensed programming on television. The novel can also take risks that the heavily commercialized, sponsor-dependent medium of television cannot; it can present unpopular and controversial opinions that make the reader uncomfortable, or even offend his or her sensibility. *Allah superstar* is particularly illustrative in this regard, representing a minority viewpoint on a sensitive social issue that is often overlooked by the media. Y.B. uses the open format of the novel to demonstrate the complexity and inconsistency in the social situation of young French Beurs, effectively problematizing the one-sided representation of this group that one often finds on television or in the press. *Allah superstar* directly implicates the reader in the injustice revealed by Kamel's narrative and suggests that violence is inevitable in a social framework that limits the opportunities afforded to minority populations. The novel's interpretation of the racism

² Tamara Chaplin Matheson has written about the television book show broadcast on early French television that testifies to a much more meditative and intelligent era of television programming. Writers and philosophers were featured on these programs and allowed to speak at length about their work. (*Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television*).

embedded in the French historic narrative disrupts the characterization of the French public as victims of hostile foreign aggression. This is a risky and likely unpopular stance for the novel to take.

Violence merits special attention here, as it is often both a target and a weapon in the novel's televisual critique. *99 francs*, for instance, portrays a society whose morals have degenerated to the point where transgression is no longer possible – the novel is excessive in its representation of drugs, prostitution, vulgarity, and violence in order to underscore the decadence of contemporary society and to evoke a visceral response in its reader. Beigbeder pushes transgression to its apogee in order to question whether an ethical norm still exists given that symbolic violence, discrimination, misogyny, and economic exploitation are commonplace features of the mass media landscape. Likewise, *Allah superstar* uses suicide bombing to directly confront the relationship between the mainstream French public and its “othered” minority population. The mass media is implicated in the alienation and dehumanization of postcolonial subjects, putting them on display while denying them full integration in French society. Kamel, the novel's narrator, forces a confrontation between his French audience and the Other by ending the spectacle of his stand-up performance with a deadly suicide bombing. The prominence of violence in these novels should give the reader pause: how does the literary representation of violence in these works act to distinguish the novel from televisual media? Isn't the novel also creating spectacles of violence akin to those that drive ratings for news programs, reality TV, and crime shows?

Slavoj Žižek provides a useful framework in understanding how the violence in these novels counteracts the violence on television. Žižek distinguishes between the

“subjective violence” that characterizes much of the content on news programs and the “objective” and “symbolic” violence that provides a context and a rationale for the more visible transgressions (*Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*). While “subjective violence” is more overt, defined by Žižek as “that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds” (10), objective and symbolic violence are more insidious, less visible, and ultimately the source of subjective violence. *99 francs* and *Allah superstar* both tie their use of subjective violence to social and economic structures – there is an effort made to explain explosions of violence through analysis of more general societal problems. If television focuses on spectacles of isolated, individual acts of violence, then the novel is the place where singular experience reflects broader conflicts.

There is one work, however, that questions the novel’s distinction as a more ethically responsive medium. While *Acide sulfurique* literalizes the violence of reality TV in creating a concentration camp whose prisoners are forced to endure physical and mental abuse for the entertainment of the viewing public, its ethical critique is compromised by the fact that Nothomb’s novels participate in the same cultural current that she satirizes in her representation of TV programming. The narrative produces the same detached stance characteristic of televised spectacle, where the viewer is horrified by what is happening yet also drawn to see more of the gruesome details. The broader social critique initially suggested by the novel’s premise deteriorates into a spectacle of particularity as the narrative focuses on the relationship between the two main characters and the revelation of their intimate secrets. Nothomb’s novel serves as a reminder that literary works, and especially those that cater to mainstream audiences, must adapt to the

desires of their readership; writing within a televisual culture entails not only reacting to television, but also fitting into it.

Lastly, my analysis of these novels draws attention to the way that literature responds to changes in epistemology and subjectivity. As Frank Kermode writes in *The Sense of an Ending*, “Fictions are for finding things out; and they change as the needs of sense-making change” (39). The novel strives to reflect the ways in which television structures our perception and interpretation of the world. *99 francs*, *Allah superstar*, and *J’habite* place special emphasis on conveying televisual consciousness, whether it be by breaking down the syntax of the narrative to speak only through advertising slogans, creating a montage of cultural citations that correspond to channel-surfing or televisual flow, or reflecting a digital identity assembled through a database structure. Translating the experience of television into language draws the reader’s attention to how sense-making is changing, and how it differs from the conventional ways that literature comprehends the world. Reading these televisual narratives is very likely a surprising or disorienting experience; while the reader expects the written story to obey a temporal and sequential logic, the representation of televisual consciousness is much more heterogeneous and fragmented. What will happen to knowledge and communication as individuals are increasingly conditioned to think televisually?

The novel is granted a privileged role in answering these sorts of questions because it is sensitive to that basic element of thought and communication that is language. The cultural transformations produced by television are etched into the words we use and the syntax that links them together. There is a theoretical current that fears that reasoned discourse is being threatened by the schizophrenic juxtaposition of

advertising slogans and sound bytes. Baudrillard has been particularly vocal about the disintegration of meaningful language in the face of advertising and digital media.

Writing in his essay, “The Year 2000 has Already Happened”, he argues,

The “narrative” has become impossible, since it is by definition (re-citatum) the possible recurrence of a sequence of sense. Today each fact, each event, through the impulse to diffusion, through the injunction to circulation, to total communication, is liberated solely for itself – each fact becomes atomic, nuclear, and pursues its own trajectory in the void. [...] Each event becomes inconsequential, because it goes too fast – it is too quickly diffused, too far, it is seized by the circuits – it will never return to testify to itself, nor to its meaning (sense is always a testimony). Moreover, each cultural and factual set must be fragmented, disarticulated, in order to enter the circuits, each language must be resolved into 0/1, into binary terms, in order to circulate no longer in our memory, but in the memories, electronic and luminous, of computers. No human language can resist the speed of light. No historical event can resist its planetary diffusion. No meaning can resist its acceleration. (36).

For Baudrillard, the media fragment events, creating a schizophrenic experience whereby information is processed as a mixture of unrelated bits – there is no logical or temporal structure with which to organize this data into a meaningful narrative. Digital technology exacerbates this situation by translating language into code and separating the parts from the whole. There are no “stories” to make sense of the data.

Baudrillard offers an extreme view on a topic that interests many media and literary theorists, namely how narrative is to survive in a culture that organizes information in increasingly non-narrative ways. According to Lev Manovich, digital media present a paradigm that directly affects cognition and cultural forms. Individuals accustomed to interacting with digital media think according to a database logic, associating ideas by theme rather than temporal sequence. The rise of the Internet encourages society to increasingly depend on database, rather than narrative, to organize and process information. Lev Manovich writes,

As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world. (225)

While some theorists doubt whether database and narrative are as exclusive as Manovich claims (N. Katherine Hayles, for one, sees database and narrative as “natural symbionts” rather than enemies (*How We Think*, 176)), it is to the advantage of literature to adapt to new sense-making paradigms by experimenting with conventions of style, grammar, and structure. Literature, too, must begin to process the world differently.

The novels in this study illustrate the innovative ways that the text can represent televisual subjectivity and play with this tension between narrative and non-narrative logic. In *Allah superstar*, Kamel’s reasoning reflects the logic of montage that is characteristic of channel surfing. His discourse is a heterogeneous mixture of references and expressions acquired through televisual exposure, and his receptivity to the various influences of media and his local community result in contradictions that render his understanding of his political situation inconsistent and fragmented. *99 francs* evokes the fear that advertising is undermining the meaningfulness of language, in that we speak through fashionable expressions that communicate little more than our familiarity with the latest trends. At the end of the novel, the narrative degenerates into a stream of commercial slogans whose lack of syntax realizes Baudrillard’s media nightmare: “different brands succeed one another, are juxtaposed, or replace one another, without articulation or transition; this is an erratic lexical system in which brands devour one another and the lifeblood of each brand is interminable repetition. There can be no more impoverished language than this one, laden with referents yet empty of meaning as it is”

(*The System of Objects*, 191). In Beigbeder's novel, the advertising industry colonizes language and renders it meaningless, essentially monopolizing the channels of thought and communication while making it impossible to think outside the logic of commercialism.

Despite some of the bleak conclusions of these novels, the urge to integrate televisual structure into the narrative results in innovative and thought-provoking works that challenge the conventions of narrative, genre, and authorship. For instance, *J'habite* illustrates the intersection between individual consciousness and outside information by interrupting the narrative voice with external references. Delaume's own discourse is permeated by media to the point where she can no longer recognize if an autonomous self exists amid the external messages she has absorbed. Her assembled subjectivity problematizes the ability to write the self through autofiction: how can she possibly author her own narrative if the trajectory of her life story is determined by outside influence? This conflict between individual agency and televisual determinism inspires a work that integrates fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, essay, and fantasy in order to more accurately reflect the virtualized, pluralistic subjectivity of information networks.

The way that we receive and process information via television also directly affects our interaction with the text. The phenomenological experience of reading is being redefined by screens and digital media. As Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier argue in *A History of Reading in the West*, different historical epochs create different reading strategies, from the "intensive" reading of the eighteenth century in which Rousseau and Goethe's novels were "read and reread, memorized, cited and recited" (25) to the bygone days of reading aloud in a family or social setting. In terms of our own

televisual epoch, we can see distinct ways of reading emerging from the ways that novelists choose to style their novels. The lengthy, literary sentences found in *La Télévision* have a comical and ironic air, obviously disconnected from the more colloquial speech of mass media. *99 francs* and *Allah superstar* have a much more informal style, while *J'habite* borrows from the hypertext in its montage of cited documents. *Acide sulfurique* questions whether it is still possible to make a general argument in works of fiction, or whether the novel, like Reality programming, is destined to portray only spectacles of particularity.

These novels may one day serve to archive the way that television changed the mind at the turn of the twenty-first century. They portray the transformations in subjectivity, consciousness, and language produced by a medium that has redefined our means of communicating and perceiving the world. They bring together the fears and anxieties that the old ways of sense-making and connecting to our communities are crumbling. They also stand as a testament to the fact that crisis is productive of change, experimentation, and redefinition. The pressure to make the novel relevant to a new era of readers results in fiction that is pushing the bounds of what the novel can do, rivaling television in its access to immediacy and authenticity. For readers who choose to remain loyal to the novel despite the tempting distraction of digital screens, the reading experience is certain to be exhilarating and surprising.

Chapter 1: Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Télévision*: Reappraising the Novel vis-à-vis Television

As mentioned in the Introduction, the novel's survival strategies entail a delicate balance between distinguishing the novel from television and acknowledging the significant place that television holds in contemporary culture. It is to the novel's benefit to play the role of media outsider, but it must also avert accusations of elitism or aloofness. It must be distinctive enough to be irreplaceable by another medium, yet not so peculiar that it fails to be relevant to its time and place in history.

This question of where the novel falls vis-à-vis popular cultural is significant, because for many non-readers the image of the book connotes condescension and snobbery. There is a long tradition of denigrating popular culture by opposing it to the more intellectually rigorous activity of reading serious texts. The Frankfurt School warned against the mind-numbing impact of consuming mass culture, which critics like Theodor Adorno tied to capitalism and its goal of preventing critical or oppositional thinking. Roland Barthes distinguished the popular written "work", intended for easy consumption and the reaffirming of familiar conventions, from the more challenging "text". In *On Television*, French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu argued that the fast pace of television impedes the formation of deeper thought.

Today, this sort of media critique would likely seem out of touch, the discourse of privileged cultural conservatives speaking from the Ivory Tower. Kathleen Fitzpatrick qualifies this cultural elitism as dismissive of the general population that enjoys the products of the "Culture Industry". It assumes that "what will save the novel is thus not a return to the cultural center but an entrenchment on the edges, in which the cachet of marginality serves to create a protected space within which the novel can continue as art

by restricting itself to those few readers equipped to appreciate it” (5). This perspective attributes the dwindling popularity of the novel to a decline in intellectualism, and redefines the genre as “high art” that caters to those with the cultural capital and education necessary to comprehend it.

It may well be the theoretical heritage of Postmodernism that renders this distinction between high and low culture dated. In his book, *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen attributes the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture to a bygone era of classical modernism, referring to Roland Barthes’ dichotomy between *plaisir* and *jouissance*, text and work, as a “tired topoi” (211). There seems to be a shift, even among more “literary works”, of engaging in popular culture – Chloé Delaume, whose writing is featured in the last chapter of this study, serves as an example of a challenging, serious writer whose work interacts with video games and mainstream television shows. It appears that novelists are increasingly concerned with appearing relevant to popular culture rather than distinguishing themselves from it.

Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s novel unfolds in this tension between the “classic” view that literature and the fine arts have much to offer a public that is being anesthetized by popular culture and the more current view that mass media is now a normal part of life scorned only by cultural snobs. The comic nature of this work allows it to explore the thorny situation in which the novel (and perhaps the humanities more broadly) finds itself. How can writers convince the public that their work is special and worthwhile without falling into the trap of cultural elitism?

La Télévision’s unnamed narrator is an academic working on sabbatical in Germany who has recently decided to avoid television, quitting it like a bad habit. He

acts as the champion of the humanities, writing (or attempting to write) a study of Titian while meditating on how literature and painting differ from the fast-paced, chaotic medium of television. The protagonist makes several convincing arguments in favor of literature, and the reader is sympathetic to his claims. Nonetheless, a heavy irony runs through *La Télévision* that ridicules the narrator's demeanor and elitist pretensions: he is a stranger in a foreign land, committing social foibles as he attempts the so-called serious work of academic research. His work on Titian has little relevance to the world around him and clearly lacks in urgency, given that the narrator makes almost no progress in his project. The high culture that he so dearly wishes to elevate is brought low by his hedonism - while at the art museum, for instance, the protagonist seems as intrigued by his sandwich as he is by the works of art (186-187). Even his goal of avoiding television falls apart, given that he is haunted by the ubiquity of television monitors and in the end purchases one for his home.

The irony and humor in *La Télévision* create a hesitation between seeing this novel as a serious defense of literature and a parody of the awkward situation in which the novel finds itself. Are the qualities that define the genre – its slowness, its description, its subjective rendering of the senses – virtues, or are they rather death rattles among a society that values speed and action? Is the protagonist, an avowed admirer of the arts, someone to be admired, or is he instead a caricature that elicits the reader's mockery? Toussaint's work exaggerates the literary style of the novel and juxtaposes it with the most mundane content in a way that parodies the genre, and yet the humor that arises from this incongruity is an irresistibly convincing reason to continue reading novels.

La Télévision reminds its readers that literature must not take itself too seriously. Jean-Philippe Toussaint is an important author published by the prestigious *Editions de Minuit*, winner of the distinguished Belgian Rossel prize and the *Prix Médicis*, and the subject of much critical and academic research. Despite his notable contribution to contemporary francophone literature, however, Toussaint defines the novel as an unpretentious genre in *La Télévision*. There are no lofty aspirations here to alter cultural consciousness, no apocalyptic portrayals of social collapse, no metaphors borrowed from the Holocaust or the Bible. Toussaint is known as a minimalist writer, producing short works in a style that is simple and straightforward. In terms of scope and ambition, *La Télévision* returns the novel to its origins as described by Mikhail Bakhtin:

Alongside laughing at living reality there flourished parody and travesty of all high genres and of all lofty models embodied in national myth. The “absolute past” of gods, demigods and heroes is here, in parodies and even more so in travesties, “contemporized”: it is brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity. (“Epic and Novel”, 21)

La Télévision basks in laughter and ambiguity, “bringing low” the impulse to distinguish the novel from the intellectually undemanding entertainment of television. It celebrates the novel’s ability to parody “lofty models”, including itself.

Unlike some of the other novels discussed in this study, *La Télévision* does not engage in controversy or heated polemical debate. The novel is largely ludic and enjoyable, striving to convince by pleasure rather than confrontation. Toussaint himself presents a non-controversial persona in his public statements and appearances, refraining from the shocking antics and public provocations typically associated with popular writers such as Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, and Amélie Nothomb. For Toussaint, the novel is an aesthetic rather than a polemical genre, and he has publicly

stated that “literature has no real political or social role to play. Its role is primarily aesthetic. It’s an art.”³ This statement certainly runs counter to the approach of other socially engaged novelists, and may explain why Toussaint’s novels are often noted more for their literary merit than their social critique.

As a strategy for ensuring the novel’s survival in an increasingly mediatized environment, this aesthetic approach has its advantages and disadvantages: on one hand, this novel is much more palatable than some of the other abrasive novels in our study. It does not accuse its reader or demand that he change his behavior, eliciting pleasure rather than confrontation. Toussaint presents his televisual critique through a comic lens, one that evokes laughter in addition to serious reflection. This is a more lighthearted discussion about the role of television and art in contemporary life. On the other hand, it is all too easy to overlook or distance oneself from the novel’s nuanced critique. The defense of the novel is less urgent and more ambiguous here, diminishing the impact of its argument. This question concerning the effectiveness of Toussaint’s approach will be of key importance in my analysis.

Lagging Behind: Reading in the Age of Speed

Literature is undeniably a slow medium: it takes much longer to process a text than to consume a series of televisual images. Television, meanwhile, is defined by speed and immediacy: live television promises to connect the viewer to the living, constantly changing present, and the increasing rate at which television moves (in terms of editing and content) testifies to its preference for speed. This observation has served as the basis for televisual critique, in that television supposedly does not allow for the slow digestion

³ <http://quarterlyconversation.com/jean-philippe-toussaint-interview>

of complex thought. In his analysis of television, Bourdieu refers to Plato's opposition between the philosopher who has time and the people in the agora who are in a hurry; deep reflection necessarily depends on having the time to elaborate an idea, reason through its complexity, and debate opposing views (*On Television*, 28). Paul Virilio has likewise expounded on the effects of technological speed as it pertains to the human body, highlighting the paradox that as machines move faster, the human body becomes increasingly inert (*Polar Inertia*). Speed, for Virilio, represents a void that is obliterating the vitality of lived experience. There is a very distinct suspicion among proponents of the book that the increasing speed of mediatised, technology-dependent life is undermining the value of human perception and deep reflection.

Toussaint presents this aversion to speed through his narrator. Moving through all the channels, the protagonist realizes that there is no end to the broadcasting, the machine accelerating at a mad and exhausting rate: “du mouvement encore, rapide et affolé, s'accélération toujours à perdre haleine, comme cette lancinante prise de vue subjective d'une locomotive [...]” (131). There is no opportunity for the mind to rest or make sense of the content, which in itself is varied and confusing. Toussaint's narrator argues that televisual images are aggressive, assailing the mind and rendering it immobile in the face of its relentless stimulation: “à peine notre esprit, alerté par ces signaux, a-t-il rassemblé ses forces en vue de la réflexion, que la télévision est déjà passée à autre chose, à la suite, à de nouvelles stimulations, à de nouveaux signaux tout aussi stridents que les précédents” (22). Perhaps in a nod to Paul Virilio's virtual invalid, the narrator remarks that his body suffers from prolonged sessions of televisual consumption: “Je sortais de ces retransmissions nauséux et fourbu, l'esprit vide, les jambes molles, les yeux mousses”

(10).

This hyperbolic representation of television is logical given that the narrator is in many ways the embodiment, if not the caricature, of slowness. He admits to swimming at the pace of only two kilometers per hour (“je nage lentement, comme une vieille dame”), arrests the progress of his academic work for several days to ponder the spelling of Titian’s name, and presents a preference for leisurely pursuits such as reading, making love, and sunbathing. There is no urgency to this character, and his inability to finish his book is both poetic and comical:

Ce qui permettait sans doute le mieux d’évaluer la réussite d’une journée de travail, me semblait-il, c’était la manière dont nous avons perçu le temps passer pendant les heures où nous avons travaillé, la faculté singulière que le temps avait eue de se charger du poids de notre travail [...] (127).

Apparently the sensation of leisure is ample compensation for the fact that he has spent the workday sunbathing in the park. The concept of time here is of an altogether different nature than the flow of television – *La Télévision*’s narrator enjoys the stillness of the moment, the feeling of inactivity.

This attitude to time, however, qualifies the protagonist as something of an eccentric. In his book *The Sunday of Fiction*, Peter Schulman defines the modern fictional eccentric as someone who obeys his or her own distinct pace rather than conforming to the rigid or accelerated schedules of contemporary life. Modern eccentrics seem permanently fixed on Sunday, as though every day were sacred, free from work and obligations, and cheerful (9). As a form of literary representation, the eccentric challenges the loss of free time in the industrial economy and the negligence of quotidian existence. Toussaint’s protagonist likewise lives according to his own leisure, taking the time to reflect on the mundane aspects of life and in the process subverting technological

speed.

It is difficult to judge, however, whether this eccentric should be lauded for his courage in opposing the speed of hypermodernity, or whether his preference for leisure is a sign of risible idleness. While his individuality and attention to the small details of everyday life are charming, he also seems comically unproductive. Do the lengthy scenes in which he waters his neighbors' plants inspire the reader to see the nobility of these inert creatures, or do they merely evoke laughter? He describes the rubber plant: "J'aimais la tristesse impassible qui se dégageait de ce caoutchouc, son côté sphinx, son calme, son détachement, comme son indifférence foncière au monde. Eût-il parlé qu'il eût bâillé, tel eût été l'oracle, son simple commentaire sur le monde" (34). The excessive wordiness is both poetic and comical, challenging the reader's interpretation of this scene. The question is whether he sees something in the everyday that the rest of us ignore, or whether his observations are but the idle rambling of a mind with little else to do.

The hesitation between identifying with this character and keeping him at a comic distance puts the novel's larger argument about the value of literature into jeopardy. *La Télévision* creates an ambiguity that is difficult to discern, vacillating between cultural critique and irony. For instance, one of the narrator's more marked observations regarding televisual spectatorship ("j'éprouvais à cette vue la même impression pénible de multitude et d'uniformité" (38)) follows the humorous scene in which he waters his neighbors' plants. His observations on television are then followed by the unexpected surprise of catching an attractive woman in the nude, effectively framing his meditation by scenes that undermine his seriousness.

To add another layer to this ambivalence, the unhurried narrator in many ways embodies the slow pace of literature. His discourse is distinctly literary, a parody of the lengthy, indirect sentences, subordinate clauses, and foregrounding of sensation reminiscent of proustian prose.⁴ He leads his life according to a romantic, literary pace, relishing in the still details. Avowed bibliophile and academic, he argues in favor of slowing down and savoring the text.⁵ Toussaint cites the narrator's writing process in his own memoir to represent his personal approach to his craft, suggesting that this is not an isolated oddity but an illustration of the author's view of writing. Toussaint seems to imply that his protagonist acts as a metaphor for literature, reflecting its most characteristic traits as well as its ex-centric position in televisual culture.

The narrative likewise pushes to an extreme the slowness characteristic of literature and parodies the idea that books are slow and uneventful. This is not a novel where much happens on the level of plot. This work is much longer than Toussaint's other minimalist novels, and most of the pages are filled with meditation on the sensory experience of the everyday:

J'aime beaucoup faire l'amour en effet (à plus d'un titre), et, sans vouloir ici évoquer mon style en la matière, qui s'apparenterait d'ailleurs plus à la quiétude sensuelle d'une longueur de brasse qu'à l'énergie désordonnée et virilement fanfaronne d'un quatre cent mètres papillon, je retiendrai surtout que faire l'amour m'apporte un grand équilibre intérieur, et que, l'étreinte passée, tandis que je rêve sur le dos dans la douceur des draps en savourant la simple bonhomie de l'instant qui s'écoule, je ressens une irrépressible bonne humeur qui vient se traduire sur mon visage par un léger sourire inattendu et quelque chose de brillant dans l'oeil, de malicieux et de complice. (12)

⁴ The narrator cites Proust in *La Télévision* (107), and Toussaint devotes an entire chapter to Proust in his memoir *l'Urgence et la Patience*, suggesting that this literary figure influenced the style of the novel.

⁵ "Car, au lieu que les livres, par exemple, offrent toujours mille fois plus que ce qu'ils sont, la télévision offre exactement ce qu'elle est, son immédiateté essentielle, sa superficialité en cours" (132).

Toussaint has clearly chosen a slower form of narration, one whose long and winding sentences deter the succession of events. If reading is now a relatively slow activity, this narrative is its quintessence, actively defying movement in order to rest in place and slow the progress of events.

Parodying the slowness of the book, however, also implies a commentary on its ability to fit into its cultural context. The book holds a marginalized position in *La Télévision*'s fast-paced world. The protagonist's television set has legs that resemble open books, giving it the appearance of resting triumphantly atop the book, "comme un reproche tacite" (8). The cultural dominance of television is evident in other ways as well: the only reading material readily available in every home is the TV guide, and the protagonist fears that this part of the newspaper, which once only occupied a small section, will one day come to command the daily news and leave only a small column for the affairs of the world (55). Although eager to lend their books "tant qu'on voulait", people are reticent to part with their televisions, suggesting that what matters most is not the printed word but rather the televisual image.

The book is lagging behind, not only as a slower medium but also one whose information is always deferred. It is no coincidence that the protagonist is focusing his studies on a long-forgotten event concerning a Renaissance painter. This is another caricature of the "old news" presented in books, a result of the time that it takes to write, edit, and publish a manuscript. This lengthy process is being surpassed by media that can broadcast events in real time. As Paul Virilio explains, "It is real time that threatens writing. Writing is always, always, in a deferred time, always delayed. Once the image is live, there is a conflict between deferred time and real time, and in this there is a

serious threat to writing and the author” (*The Virilio Reader*, 16). When audiences are accustomed to having access to the latest news, of what value is a book concerning a past event?

The comic irony in this novel makes it difficult to gauge whether Toussaint is seriously concerned about the threat that television poses to the novel’s survival, or whether he is caricaturing some of the paranoid conclusions circulating in media and literary theory. It is curious that while the other works in this study seek to adapt the novel to televisual culture, whether by adopting the structure of television or borrowing phrases from popular programming, this one hyperbolically embraces its difference by pushing to an extreme its slow development, intricate syntax, and anachronistic references. And yet the fact that the novel cannot keep pace with the changing world is not a cause for tragedy, but rather an opportunity to embrace its ironic potential by turning its critical eye toward itself in order to see its own pretensions in comic light.

Reading for Pleasure

Reading is defined as a pleasurable pastime throughout *La Télévision*. John, the protagonist’s friend, provides an example of the ideal reader, one who reads frequently and with great joy. The protagonist describes reading as John’s primary preoccupation: “Il ne faisait rien de particulier (il lisait, il était toujours en train de lire, John)” (111). Upon noticing him at the Einstein Café, the protagonist remarks: “John [...] lisait à une table à l’écart, la tête penchée sur son livre avec un léger sourire de bonheur qui irradiait son visage” (114). John’s smile recalls the same sensual pleasure that the protagonist associates with swimming and making love: “Eh bien, nager m’apporte la même sorte de satisfaction, la même plénitude du corps, qui, peu à peu, lentement, comme une onde, se

propage à l'esprit et amène à sourire" (12). There is a hedonistic pleasure associated with reading, one that manifests itself in the body.

La Télévision also seeks to elicit this pleasure in its reader, given that it is essentially a comic book driven by situational and dramatic irony. Books are not given any sort of edifying purpose here: they do not sharpen the reader's political or ethical sensibility, nor do they seek to change the world. While reading, one is doing "nothing in particular", as the protagonist describes John. This fits with Toussaint's stated opinion that literature is above all an art whose purpose is aesthetic. One reads novels in order to please the senses – not to engage in an argument, to gain information, or to become a better person.

And yet this insistence on the pleasure of reading novels is not as trite as it seems. For one thing, it breaks with the more elitist arguments opposing the critical thought of the written word with the passive entertainment of television. *La Télévision* seems to mock the pretentiousness of academic attitudes toward the arts, stressing the idleness of its protagonist and undermining his serious research on Titian by juxtaposing it with his tendency toward more relaxing pursuits. Pleasure may indeed be a more persuasive reason to read novels in that it avoids the condescension of cultural critics who assume that books hold a monopoly on intelligent communication. In a more open, democratic age that no longer sees high culture with the reverence it once did, pleasure may resonate more strongly than an insistence on intellectually challenging art. Susan Sontag, writing in 1966, predicted this turn to pleasure as art's defining aim:

the purpose of art is always, ultimately, to give pleasure [...]. And, one can also say that, balancing the ostensible anti-hedonism of serious contemporary art, the modern sensibility is more involved with pleasure in the familiar sense than ever. Because the new sensibility demands less "content" in art, and is more open to the

pleasures of “form” and style, it is also less snobbish, less moralistic – in that it does not demand that pleasure in art necessarily be associated with edification. (303)

It is noteworthy that Sontag stresses form and style as opposed to content. *La Télévision* actively opposes any clear message in its story and minimizes the actual events in order to focus on the style of the writing. The reader is invited to indulge the senses in the aesthetics of the narrative.

Emphasizing the pleasure of reading is also an intriguing defense for the novel because television is largely seen as the most pleasurable medium. The very structure of television is tied to enjoyment, as it relies on the pleasure of its audiences to increase ratings and draw advertising revenue. The pleasure of television is an easily accessible one; while Marshal McLuhan famously described television as a “cool medium” soliciting participation (*Understanding Media*, 311), the high definition images of today’s television screens and the quantity of data filtering through the programs in fact make it “hot”, enabling the viewer to consume its programming without much effort. It is for this reason that rivaling the television in its ability to please is a risky strategy for the novelist. How could the “cool” novel, so demanding in focus and attention, possibly compete with television in terms of pleasure?

La Télévision contends that the pleasure afforded by reading is of an altogether different variety than that provided by television. Literature and the arts are tied to the pleasure of the senses and the experience of one’s body. If television negates the body by creating an inert audience and fatiguing its faculties by going faster than the human rate of sensory processing, then art and literature are its antidote, reconnecting the spectator with the forgotten sensation of his or her body. Works of art are inherently sensual,

bearing the mark of their creators. For the protagonist, Renaissance painting reflects the presence of a physical body whose trace can be read in the brush strokes:

[...] des huiles et des coups de brosse sur la toile, des retouches légères, au pinceau ou même au doigt, d'un simple frottement du bord du pouce dans la pâte encore légèrement humide d'huile de lin, d'avoir en face de soi quelque chose de vivant, de la chair ou des cheveux, de l'étoffe ou des drapés, d'être en présence d'un personnage complexe, humain [...] (13).

The mark of the painter's hand creates a direct connection between the work of art and the body of its creator. Likewise, to look at the painting is to allow it to invade the spectator's senses and to leave its imprint on one's imagination and sensibility. In recreating Titian's painting from memory, the protagonist is able to recall the details of his subject's gesture, his expression, the lines of his face, and even the cracks in the veneer (196). The work of art is thus a sensorial experience, an intimate connection with another human being.

This sensuous interaction with art can easily apply to a work of literature. *La Télévision*'s narrative stresses the sensorial experience of the narrator, limiting the action in the plot to the microevents occurring within the protagonist's body. The deceleration of the narrative allows for the protagonist to unravel his thoughts, giving the reader an intimate portrait of his subjective experience. Unlike some of Toussaint's earlier novels, such as *l'Appareil-Photo* or *La Salle de Bain*, *La Télévision* privileges the perspective of the narrator over the objective description of events. The contrast is apparent in the juxtaposition of two descriptive scenes, one from *La Salle de Bain*, the other from *La Télévision*:

A côté de la grande baie vitrée, dans un renforcement, se trouvaient les locaux du Syndicat d'initiative. Je regardai les photos, les affiches. Derrière le comptoir, une demoiselle téléphonait, prenait des notes de la main droite. (*La Salle de Bain*, 50).

Je finis par ouvrir un oeil, toujours allongé sur le dos sur la pelouse du parc de Halensee, et, comme il arrive souvent lorsque on a gardé trop longtemps les yeux fermés sous la lumière du soleil, toutes les couleurs de la nature, le vert de la pelouse et le bleu très dense du ciel me parurent alors remarquablement nets et brillants, comme lavés à grande eau sous l'éclat métallique d'une averse damasquinée. (*La Télévision*, 82).

The staccato sentences in *La Salle de Bain* hasten the succession of events by communicating in a direct, efficient way what is occurring in the scene. *La Télévision*, on the other hand, mediates all the events through the slow, complex perceptions of the narrator, resulting in lengthy, indirect sentences, subordinate clauses, and a foregrounding of sensation. The stylistic choice communicates the importance of perception and aesthetic appreciation.

Slowness appears to provide an advantage here. While the speed of television anesthetizes the human body, the work of art unravels through a slow process of sense-making. Painting is present throughout the novel, and it is crucial as a contrast to television. The still image of the painting allows for slow contemplation and the essential process of creating meaning, which the protagonist finds to be impossible at televisual speed. While at the Berlin art museum, the protagonist finds that Dürer's paintings inspire him with a medley of emotions and thoughts, much like the confusion that erupts from the television. However, having the time to process the painting is what allows those chaotic thoughts to come together: "de ce désordre, de ce chaos interne, naissait un sentiment de plénitude et l'apparence d'une cohérence" (188). Reading and writing are likewise to be enjoyed at a leisurely pace: the Pléiade's edition of Musset's works is intended "to be gnawed slowly like the small bones of a rabbit" (73, my translation).

The connection between literature and the body is etched into French literary theory, largely thanks to Roland Barthes' *Le Plaisir du texte*. Barthes refers to the text as

an anagram of the body, not in its physiologically functional form, but in its erotic, sensuous pleasure. To deny oneself the pleasure of reading would be equivalent to reducing the body to only its most basic and automatic functions. A society that chooses not to read becomes “frigid” (114). Of course, for Barthes writing and reading were inextricably tied to the body, and in writing his *Variations sur l’écriture* he focused on the manuscript, writing by hand, and the physical gesture of marking a surface.

While it is difficult to distinguish the irony in *La Télévision* from its more serious commentary, it is safe to consider this emphasis on art and sensorial pleasure a valid defense of literature in this work. Despite some of the hyperbolic descriptions of mundane things, *La Télévision* does indeed manage to awaken the reader’s sensibility to ordinary experience. The visceral and romantic descriptions of everyday objects serve as a reminder that the virtual experience of the television screen negates the pleasures of embodied existence. The notion that literature awakens the senses has a long history⁶, and yet this ability to recover the senses through aesthetics takes on a new importance in a technological environment. The protagonist’s eccentricity draws attention to the cultural milieu that positions aesthetic appreciation as an oddity. While the reader may not identify with the protagonist, he or she is drawn to question why this character elicits so much laughter. What does it mean for our society to find someone who stops to enjoy life as an object of ridicule?

As Peter Schulman notes, the modern eccentric points to the loss of traditional

⁶ Victor Shklovsky notably described art as a means of ‘making strange’ in his 1917 essay “Art as Technique”: “art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*... The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.”

values. He or she is chronologically “old fashioned”, and yet being out of sync with what is fashionable is in many ways appealing (135). Not only is this someone who is non-programmatic, manifesting a free will resistant to the surrounding trends, but he or she seems attuned to the pleasures to which the rest of society is oblivious. Schulman explains the literary eccentrics’ sense of freedom:

Their lives are truly like Sundays because the heavy burdens of life do not seem to oppress them. Instead, they tend to see the poetry in everyday life and are able to transform daily occurrences into fun-filled events. [...] life is viewed with a childlike innocence and playfulness. If their lives resemble Sundays, it is not because they seem to always have time to waste, but because they approach each day as though it were a holiday made for fun. (115)

This refreshing childlike quality runs throughout the protagonist’s aesthetic sensibility. His lengthy reimagining of the scene in which Titian drops his paintbrush in front of the Emperor ends with a physical recreation in which the protagonist’s son plays the role of Titian, robed in pajamas and drawing with a marker (82). There is a youthful quality in the protagonist’s ability to creatively bring his surroundings to life, and Toussaint clearly implies that this is an attitude to which we should all aspire.

The ludic playfulness of the novel likewise encourages imagination and creativity. The reader needs to “paint” the descriptive scene to appreciate it and release the rigidity of serious discourse to comprehend the novel’s ironic humor. If the novel is an eccentric pastime, it is nonetheless a form of liberation from the monolithic influence of the television. The protagonist is an admirable figure in that his resistance to television comprises a form of antidiscipline: he watches it without the sound (130) and with his eyes closed (134) to regain a sense of autonomy vis-à-vis the standard way that television is intended to be consumed. In trying to recall the primary reason for his decision to quit watching television, he is reminded of an anecdote:

On m'avait raconté qu'un jour, aux Etats-Unis, un journaliste d'une chaîne de télévision privée était parvenu à interroger un désespéré qui venait de se tirer une balle dans la tête sur les raisons qui avaient pu expliquer son geste [...] et que le malheureux, étendu sur le trottoir et baignant dans son sang, aurait juste, en guise de réponse [...] tendu péniblement le majeur de la main droite en direction de la caméra et murmuré *Fuck you*. (136)

Establishing one's own independence vis-à-vis televisual culture is a subversive act, one that transforms the individual from a *usager* to a *praticien*, to use Michel de Certeau's terms (*The Practice of Everyday Life*). *La Télévision* asks its readers to see the world differently, and to briefly become outsiders to their familiar ways of life. There is undoubtedly a pleasure in disrupting uniformity or rebelling against the status quo, particularly if it is done in a playful spirit.

Toussaint seeks to distinguish his own work from the deadening effects of television, and this vitality need not be heavy and serious. Toussaint reminds his readers that the novel is above all a playful genre, that its roots lie in the serious meditation on contemporary life but also in comedy, in what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the *serio-comical* (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 106). The novel should bring together the dualities of laughter and seriousness, aesthetic appreciation of the high arts and sensitivity to one's basest instincts. As Toussaint himself notes, "What really matters is to pay attention to what is both infinitely small (the most pathetic, trivial things, the most insignificant details of daily life) and infinitely large (the essential questions we have, the meaning of life, the place of human beings in the universe). A book must contain both darts and philosophy, bowling and metaphysics" (Riker). This reflection on how to define the book and how to display its characteristic features courses through *La Télévision*, turning this televisual novel into a meditation on its own genre.

Performing Literature

There seems to be an implicit challenge in *La Télévision* to demonstrate or perform what novels do best. Despite its ironic humor and seemingly banal or inconsequential events, this is a work that self-consciously exploits the novel as a representative form. It asks what the novel does inimitably, what pleasures and types of humor can only be conveyed through language. As Warren Motte writes in *Fables of the Novel*, “Through the immediate example of his own writing, [Toussaint] adumbrates a ludic parable of literature, speculating upon literature’s limits and possibilities on a contemporary cultural horizon where the value of literature is no longer taken as axiomatic, but on the contrary must be demonstrated afresh with each new literary gesture” (192-193). *La Télévision* is in many ways an ambitious work striving to prove through its own example why reading and writing matter. It is equally attentive to televisual mediation and novelistic representation, interrogating how these forms differ in their structure and effect upon the viewer/reader. Understanding how television functions brings the novel back to its own unique qualities, and this is unsurprising given that media communicate with one another. As Bolter and Grusin explain in *Remediation*,

A medium in our culture can never operate in isolation, because it must enter into relationships of respect and rivalry with other media. There may be or may have been cultures in which a single form of representation (perhaps painting or song) exists with little or no reference to other media. Such isolation does not seem possible for us today, when we cannot even recognize the representational power of a medium except with reference to other media. (65)

Thus the novel turns back to itself for reference when analyzing other media. An encounter with the Other develops one’s own sense of identity.

La Télévision reveals itself to be a rather narcissistic novel, to use Linda Hutcheon’s term. The title may signify another medium, but this is a work that is deeply

preoccupied with its own reflection. There is in fact a scene in the novel where the protagonist sees his own reflection in the television screen (196-197); in a larger sense, the television is both the subject of the novel and an opportunity for the novel to see its own image. The aversion toward television is not a neutral commentary, but rather a reflection of the novel's own sense of self.

In writing about television, Toussaint constructs a novel that is consciously literary and that seeks to perform what literature does best, what distinguishes it from its televisual rival. It is interesting to note that *La Télévision* is one of Toussaint's longer books, and that its dependence on the literary form makes it difficult to translate into images. While two of Toussaint's other novels, *La Salle de Bain* and *Monsieur*, have been adapted for the cinema, *La Télévision* remains only in novel form. The distinctly literary qualities in the novel, both stylistic and thematic, anchor it firmly in its genre.

There is first of all an attention to language and its representational quality. Toussaint encourages his reader to look AT the novel rather than to see THROUGH it, and he does this by exaggerating and parodying the realist novel. The style of the narrative is excessive considering its banal subject, as is the overindulgent attention to small details. Toussaint takes the conventional traits of the realist novel and inflates them, gently mocking its grandeur. As Dominique D. Fisher argues in "Les Non-Lieux de Jean-Philippe Toussaint", the use of the passé simple in Toussaint's narratives functions as a pastiche of the realist genre (623). The use of the passé simple feels excessive in *La Télévision*, a marker of a highly literary genre that preoccupies itself in this case with an ordinary artifact of contemporary life. The style draws attention to itself, preventing the reader from seeing it as a transparent window onto reality.

The humor in the novel relies on the playful use of language to create ironic juxtaposition. For instance, there is a scene where the protagonist is at the Beaubourg Library, seeking assistance from the librarian in his research. The style of the narrative exaggerates the importance of this event, drawing attention to small details as though they held some deeply significant secret. The movement of the librarian, for instance, is described as follows: “[...] s’emparant d’une minuscule clé dans un tiroir, il alla ouvrir une armoire métallique, devant laquelle il s’agenouilla un instant, avant de se relever avec une disquette unltrafine à la main, qu’il secoua lentement devant mes yeux avec une expression enjôleuse de mystère mêlé de connivence” (67). The climactic buildup to the mysteries contained in this disk results in an illegible code, the language of the computer contrasting with the highly stylized description of the narrator. One could imagine most of this subtle humor being lost if the scene were to unfold visually rather than literarily.

This is also a novel that is lacking in grand events, focusing instead on the small details of everyday life. The plot emphasizes avoiding action: not watching television, not working, not spending time with family. When events do occur in *La Télévision*, they tend to be banal and inconsequential: watering the neighbors’ flowers, sunbathing in the park, visiting with friends. The lack of grand events presents the opportunity for comic irony, as when the protagonist describes his mundane tour of the Dreschers’ apartment: “Assis sur le lit des Drescher, je tournais ma cuillère dans ma tasse, lentement, sortis la petite cuillère de la tasse et la suçai pour l’assécher. [...] Je bus une petite gorgée de café, reposai la tasse dans la soucoupe. La vie, quoi” (27). The protagonist repeatedly foils the reader’s expectation that something grand will happen: after building the suspense before announcing to Delon, his partner, that he has stopped watching television, the protagonist

awaits her reaction with anticipation – will she respond with surprise or encouragement to this stunning news? The scene ends with the anticlimactic response, “Oui, nous non plus on ne la regarde pas tellement ici, me dit-elle” (93). The build-up is undercut by a non-event.

Reducing the events in the plot lays the stress on language, engaging the poetic rather than the communicative function. Language becomes not a vehicle for expressing ideas, but rather the event itself. As Toussaint stresses in a 1998 interview:

J'accorde évidemment une très grande importance à la manière d'écrire puisque, comme il n'y a pas d'histoire, il ne reste que l'écriture. Dès lors qu'il y a une histoire, elle fait passer l'écriture au second plan comme un moyen. S'il y a une histoire forte, fortement charpentée, qui avance et puis tout ça..., l'écriture n'est qu'un moyen plus ou moins efficace qui fait suivre cette histoire et le lecteur est entraîné dans l'histoire. Si l'on enlève cet élément, il ne reste que l'écriture, et c'est l'écriture elle-même qui va faire avancer. L'intérêt viendra de l'écriture. (Hanson)

For Toussaint, minimizing the actual events in his novels is a way to foreground the writing rather than detracting from it by creating other distractions. Language is what transforms an ordinary moment into a poetic event. For example, there is a very long scene in which the protagonist is washing windows, and this non-event becomes a philosophical reflection on work: “je me rendis compte assez vite que, passées les premières aspersions insouciantes et légères à la surface du verre, très libres et assez déconnantes, qui sont le vrai bonheur du laveur de vitres, Jackson Pollock en savait quelque chose, les opérations deviennent tout de suite fastidieuses [...]” (97). There is a potential within these small moments for deep meditation, or for the arrival of the unexpected (such as a taxi cab appearing on the other side of the window). The poetic rendition of these small tasks elevates their importance and their interest.

Toussaint's focus on banality is a counterpoint to television, considering that the

television so often emphasizes unusual occurrences such as fires, floods, murders, and interpersonal turbulence. This creates a space for the novel to portray the neglected aspects of everyday life, investing unspectacular moments with meaning. Television seeks to broadcast the most spectacular, dramatic, extraordinary events, skewing the viewer's perspective and devaluing the microevents of everyday life. Toussaint's narrator points out that there is value in the small events that are so often ignored by the media. He explains the contrast between TV's dramatic events and the triumph of the ordinary:

Une des caractéristiques de la télévision, en effet, quand on ne la regarde pas, est de nous faire croire que quelque chose pourrait se passer si on l'allumait, que quelque chose pourrait arriver de plus fort et de plus inattendu que ce qui nous arrive d'ordinaire dans la vie. Mais cette attente est vaine et perpétuellement déçue évidemment, car il ne se passe jamais rien à la télévision, et le moindre événement de notre vie personnelle nous touche toujours davantage que tous les événements catastrophiques ou heureux dont on peut être témoin à la télévision. (95)

Paradoxically, the smallest event in everyday life trumps the extraordinary events shown on television, by mere virtue of occurring in reality and actually "touching" the individual. The novel carries the potential to create meaning within these minor events.

The novel's exceptional ability to examine things up close, to turn the banal into the poetic, is further highlighted by the interiority of the narration, which is to say the representation of the narrator's subjective perception of the world. *La Télévision* contains little dialogue, little action, and is mostly comprised of long descriptions that convey the narrator's sensations and point of view. The lengthy sentences and paragraphs suggest that there is space within the narrative for the protagonist's thoughts and feelings to unfold. His descriptions of minutiae indeed give the impression that there is a wealth of time offered in this genre, and that the novel's ability to unravel at a leisurely pace enables it to develop the narrator's (and the reader's) perceptive sensibility. This again

opposes visual representation, making it nearly impossible to imagine how this story could exist in any other form. A voice-over would be tiresome, the lengthy sentences difficult to process through an auditory medium. Toussaint exploits the novel's unique ability to convey the subjective inner world of an individual.

This is not to say that Toussaint himself is opposed to visual representation. Though his own views on television are more or less accurately presented through his protagonist, Toussaint is also a filmmaker, photographer, and amateur painter. Many of his other novels include meditations on visual media, including the aptly titled *l'Appareil photo*. In his essay, "Presque Sans Lumière: Le Statut de l'Image dans les Ecrits de Jean-Philippe Toussaint", Olivier Mignon points to the way that Toussaint distinguishes among the various visual media in his work and interrogates the presence of the image by rendering it strange, enigmatic, or inopportune. Toussaint reflects a keen interest in the potential and limitations of various media, and this attention to forms of representation is also apparent in his written work.

Conclusion

In an interview for *the Quarterly Conversation*, Toussaint discusses a scene in his novel *Fuir* that revolves around the cellphone. He remarks, "In the past, it would not have been possible to write that scene, for the obvious reason that cellphones did not exist 15 years ago. Starting from a new object of daily life, one discovers a new use of the novel" (Riker). The television is likewise an object that reveals new uses for the novel and new ways of understanding the qualities that have defined the novel since its origins. The slowness, sensuality, and irony of literary representation resonate differently for a readership accustomed to interacting with the world through an immediate, visual

medium.

La Télévision is a deceptive title, in that the novel is not really about television – it is about the place of the novel in a culture defined by speed, mediatized spectacle, and virtuality. Toussaint's novel is not televisual in the sense that it borrows from television; in fact, it strives to be television's antidote, embracing a highly literary style, slow development, and aesthetic description in an effort to distinguish itself from its cathodic rival. The novel finds a new use in opposing another medium, and in its effort to free itself from televisual contamination it hypermediates its own conventions, manifesting the representational qualities that make it distinct.

Irony, parody, and humor highlight the essential trait of the novel as a ludic, carnivalesque genre, but they also temper the effort to portray the novel as a superior or lofty form of representation. In his memoir of reading and writing, *l'Urgence et la patience*, Toussaint describes a particularly influential book that he read at a young age: François Truffaut's *Les Films de ma vie* (12). In the work, Truffaut advises those who are interested in making films to write books instead. Toussaint recalls, "Truffaut conseillait à tous les jeunes gens qui rêvaient de faire du cinéma, mais qui n'en avaient pas les moyens, d'écrire un livre, en expliquant que, autant le cinéma nécessite de gros budgets et implique de lourdes responsabilités, autant la littérature est une activité légère et futile, joyeuse et déconnante [...]". This is a much less intimidating portrayal of literature, and one that initially attracted Toussaint to writing novels. *La Télévision* elicits this sense of joy and freedom in its reader, stressing the ludic qualities of the genre.

Yet is pleasure enough to save the novel? *La Télévision*'s reader is drawn to celebrate the novel, to relish in the aesthetic and sensuous pleasures that it offers, and yet

there is some reluctance to fully recognize it as being at home in its new televisual society. This is an uncertain defense of the book. While the narrator seems to relish the private pleasure of reading, he does not convince anyone else in the novel to pick up a book. The televisual society in *La Télévision* seems desperate for the sensual, vibrant pleasures of the novel, yet John and the protagonist are the only two readers. The novel seems destined to become an eccentric activity. Like the protagonist on sabbatical in Berlin, the novel is a foreigner, speaking its own language and sensing that its mannerisms are somewhat out of place. There is less willingness to integrate the novel into its context than there is in some of the other works in this study.

Nonetheless, this alienation might be a welcome condition given that the world as defined by television is a rather unappealing place, characterized by uniformity, stagnation, and isolation. It may be advantageous to visit this medium as an outsider rather than to make it one's home. As Peter Schulman points out in *The Sunday of Fiction*, eccentricity is a desirable trait in that it allows one the agency and spontaneity to follow one's own rhythm rather than conforming to social systems.

Positioning the novel as an outsider to popular culture also allows it to act as a witness, observing the changing world from the sidelines. In an interview for the French culture magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, Toussaint describes his stance vis-à-vis television: "Je ne veux pas être un ennemi, je veux être un témoin. Ce qui ne m'empêche pas de porter des coups en douce" (Gabriel and Bourmeau). Being a spectator, rather than a participant, gives one critical distance, and this may explain Toussaint's inclination to portray other visual media through his writing. As visual media increasingly play a major role in structuring our lives and defining our experiences, the novel may be in a unique

position to offer critical perspective on how it affects our minds, bodies, and communities.

The “coups en douce” delivered by *La Télévision* may be effective in not antagonizing aficionados of televisual culture, but they also emit a dull rallying cry in terms of inspiring a broader readership. Rather than convincing non-readers to slow down and pick up a book, *La Télévision* reaffirms the pleasures experienced by frequent readers. The style of this novel is accessible only to individuals accustomed to processing literary description. It would be difficult to imagine a non-reader being able to immerse him or herself in the lengthy sensorial narrative, or to catch the subtle irony that permeates this story. This is a novel tailored to the tastes of regular readers, and perhaps this explains why its defense of literature is not more aggressive.

Toussaint’s subtlety and defense of literature as a primarily pleasurable medium is unique among the other books studied here. The next three chapters focus on much more aggressive defenses of literature, featuring novels that Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandell refer to as “Novels of the Contemporary Extreme.” These works take a more militant approach to fighting the novel’s embattled state and attempt to shock the reader’s consciousness rather than convince him/her by way of pleasure and slow meditation.

Beigbeder's Extreme Novel, *99 francs*

Among the writers in this study, Frédéric Beigbeder is the most publicly outspoken about the viability of the novel in media culture. Writing in his novel *Windows on the World*, Beigbeder defines his survival strategy: “Le rôle des livres est d’écrire tout ce qu’on ne peut pas voir à la télévision... La littérature est menacée, il faut se battre pour la défendre, c’est la guerre....” (111). Beigbeder may well be Toussaint’s antithesis: the romantic aesthetic of *La Télévision* contrasts sharply with the vulgar, cynical, and disillusioned style of *99 francs*. Contrary to Toussaint’s desire to separate art from politics, Beigbeder uses his work to confront capitalism and global inequality. While Toussaint is a private figure who eschews the spotlight, Beigbeder has starred in his own television show and is a staple in the French literary scene. He is as well known for his literary work as he is for his public antics.

Beigbeder elicits strong reactions from both his fans and his critics. Defenders of highbrow literature question the literariness of his writing – despite the copious books and articles devoted to Beigbeder’s work, his novels are often relegated to the category of popular fiction and dismissed by “serious” readers. Defenders of French exceptionalism object to his use of “anglicismes”: Beigbeder’s preference for English words appears as an affront to the French language itself (Smeets). The themes of his work are not intended for easy consumption: *99 francs* belongs to a category of literature referred to as “Novels of the Contemporary Extreme” by Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel, who define these novels as those set in “a hyper real, often apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction” (1). Beigbeder aggressively confronts his reader through the use of

obscenity and violence; his pessimistic representation of contemporary society pushes to an extreme the excess and meaninglessness of modern-day culture. Beigbeder's friendship with Michel Houellebecq, another *enfant terrible* of the French literary scene, only furthers his scandalous reputation⁷.

Most of this controversy arises from the fact that Beigbeder appeals directly to a younger generation of readers who are drawn to his unpretentious prose, hip lingo, and controversial subject matter. *Anglicismes* are far less offensive (and in fact carry cultural cache) to an audience who has grown up with American television shows, movies, and music. This is the readership that matters most to Beigbeder, because these are the future consumers of literature who will determine its fate. Beigbeder has created the Prix de Flore, a prize awarded annually to young francophone writers, in an effort to encourage writing among the younger generation. Beigbeder also strives to make literature accessible: in his essay *Dernier inventaire avant liquidation* (2001), he comments on the fifty favorite books selected by readers of *Le Monde*. His response to these classics is naïve, rejecting the great respect they have amassed over the years and instead reacting to them as though they had just appeared on the shelves. Beigbeder writes, "Il est temps de réentendre la voix de ces hommes et femmes comme au premier jour de leur publication, en la débarrassant, l'espace d'un instant, des appareils critiques et autres notes en bas de page qui ont tant contribué à dégoûter leurs lecteurs" (100). This attitude to classic literature (and academic criticism) explains why defenders of the establishment tend to denigrate Beigbeder, while younger readers gravitate toward him.

⁷ Houellebecq and Beigbeder cite each other in their literary works. Beigbeder includes citations from Houellebecq throughout *99 francs*, while Houellebecq writes Beigbeder as a character in his novel *La Carte et le territoire*. This referencing reinforces the thematic connection between their works as well as their public friendship.

Beigbeder's survival strategy – to have literature say what television cannot – leads him to highlight the uniquely literary aspects of the novel. Like Toussaint, Beigbeder uses hypermediation to emphasize the written medium. The organizational structure of *99 francs* as well as its wordplay, intertextual allusions, and linguistic register all work to put the literariness of this novel into relief. At the same time, Beigbeder speaks to a culture that is heavily mediatized and fluent not in the lengthy sentences characteristic of proustian prose but rather the witty slogans of advertising. He must balance his desire to seem fully integrated in contemporary media culture with his need to distinguish the novel from it – a situation that led Toussaint to parody the eccentricity of literature in its televisual context. Beigbeder, however, cannot lose his credibility vis-à-vis younger, hipper readers by resorting to self-denigration. The challenge of *99 francs* is to employ the specifically literary qualities of the novel while ensuring that the genre is seen as relevant to popular culture. *99 francs* speaks the language of the media while it condemns the manipulation of advertising; the novel plays the role of a critical insider rather than a distant observer.

Negotiating the tension between being an insider and a critic leads to interesting contradictions on the level of language in this novel. Beigbeder opposes the language of commercial media, condemning the meaningless discourse that permeates communication, yet his style and the humor of his novel borrow directly from the language of advertising. Octave, the novel's narrator, disparages the language of consumer culture while showing respect and admiration for the clever and poetic wordplay of commercial slogans. Beigbeder's real-life success in the advertising

business has clearly influenced his writing, particularly his characteristic catchy one-liners, making it difficult to entirely divorce his narrative from commercial media.

Beigbeder, does, however, make a great effort to distinguish the novel from the illusions and misleading appearances of advertising. *99 francs* defines the novel as a more authentic and honest medium, and Octave marks his story as a truthful, unflattering, and disillusioned account of reality, one that undermines the commercial interest of pleasing the public. The poetic quality of the language is undercut by the desire to pursue a raw, direct style. These attempts to portray the novel as an honest medium, however, create challenges on the level of poetics and fiction. In order to pursue a more unrefined (and thus authentic) form of writing, Beigbeder sacrifices the aesthetic polish characteristic of “good” literature. The transparency of his message limits the reader’s ability to produce multiple readings of the text, simplifying the complexity of the work. Pushing the authenticity of the text also entails stretching the limits of novelistic fiction: Beigbeder incorporates elements of the essay and autobiography that infuse reality into the fictional narrative. The drive to be honest and straightforward within a fictional, aesthetic form creates the need to redefine the novel and give it a new purpose.

Beigbeder brings the novel into contact with its historical, political, economic, and social reality, thinning the boundary between creative fiction and the real world. This direct dialogue with the extradiegetic world produces an ethical responsibility for the novel, in that its narrative engages issues that directly affect the reader. *99 francs* targets the reader’s ethical sensibility through its use of violence and obscenity, interrogating the possibility of transgression and ethical response-ability in the economy of excess. What is interesting here is the broader question of how literature represents

violence in order to create an ethical response, and how it distinguishes its own portrayal of violence from the violent spectacles featured in televisual media.

Like Toussaint, Beigbeder faces the question of how to maintain the novel's relevance while acknowledging the influence of media in popular culture. While both writers exploit the novel's ludic nature to criticize television, they differ considerably in the degree to which they embrace the language and values of media. Whereas Toussaint celebrates the eccentricity of the novel, Beigbeder stresses the connection between his narrative and the target of his analysis. In *99 francs*, the novel is a fully engaged participant in media culture, its credibility stemming from its intimacy with the object of its critique.

Playing with Commercial Language

In his portrayal of the language of advertising, Octave insists that commercials are generally unsophisticated, their formal and stylistic strategies aimed at highlighting a product rather than achieving poetic elegance. While Octave's original proposals for his Maigrette campaign entail parodies of intellectual figures and ironic humor (35), the final ad approved by his client is nothing more than a straightforward message catering to the lowest common denominator: "quelque chose de joli, doux, inoffensif et mensonger destiné à un large public de veaux bêtards" (92). The most desirable commercial is the one that merely communicates a message and requires almost no interpretation on the part of its audience.

Like many televisual novels, *99 francs* misrepresents the medium it attacks. Advertising in the last few decades has grown increasingly sophisticated, relying on parody, irony, and creative wordplay. In their book *The Dynamics of Advertising*, Barry

Richards, Iain MacRury and Jackie Botterill argue that advertising displays a verbal richness; commercials have become imaginative and innovative to appeal to audiences whose tastes are discriminating and whose attention is highly selective. French commercials are no exception to this rule, and *99 francs* proves this in quoting some memorable slogans: “100% des gagnants ont tenté leur chance” (the lottery), “il n’y que maille qui m’aille” (Maille mustard), or “du pain, du vin, du boursin” (Boursin cheese) (52). These phrases are indisputably clever – ironic, rhythmic, perhaps even poetic. Octave acknowledges their brilliance: “Putain, ça semble facile mais fallait le trouver, plus c’est simple plus c’est compliqué à débusquer. Les plus belles signatures sont d’une évidence désarmante.” Communicating a message effectively in so few words requires creative talent.

French ads have the reputation for being particularly witty, poetic, and sensuous. In a 2009 *New York Times* article titled “In France Ads Aim at Heart, Not Wallet”, Michael Kimmelman describes the way in which the cultural aversion to discussing money encourages advertising that is more subtle and ambiguous in its meaning. He writes,

Clearly French commercials speak to French culture no less than French literature or music does. Long on sensuality, style and poetry, they are notably lean on facts and nearly allergic to the rough-and-tumble of commerce. It’s forbidden here to denigrate your competitors in a television advertisement or to instruct viewers to call a certain number now to buy a product (save for exceptional cases). Hard-sell tactics, standard in America, just don’t wash in France.

The article also argues that the French are suspicious of advertising, associating commercial solicitation with manipulation. Because French television was for many decades controlled by the government and free of advertising, many French people still see the appearance of commercials during their programming as an intrusion in public

space. The distrust of advertising puts pressure on commercials to be especially clever or artful to avoid the criticism that they are merely trying to sell something to viewers. A perusal of popular commercials on the website of *L'Institut National d'Audovisuel* yields a panoply of witty and engaging ads that support the idea that advertising in France truly is an art in addition to being a solicitation for sales.

The growing sophistication of commercials has made it difficult to criticize them. In his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", David Foster Wallace argues that advertising is indeed so clever that it has co-opted the strategies that many authors use to deconstruct it. The irony and parody employed by literary writers to reveal the truth about advertising's forms of representation are ineffective because advertising already acknowledges its own motives and constructedness. Advertising mocks its own conventions, admitting that commercials are ridiculous and that both consumer and advertiser know it. Wallace writes, "How can a new image-fiction writer hope to make people more critical of televisual culture by parodying television as a self-serving commercial enterprise when Pepsi and Isuzu and FedEx parodies of self-serving commercials are already big business?" (184). As *99 francs* does not acknowledge this irony present in advertising, it chooses parody as a means to reveal the constructed nature of commercial representation, falling into the trap that Wallace describes vis-à-vis advertisements that have preemptively chosen to reveal their strategies of persuasion.

There is a paradox at play in *99 francs*. While commercials are overtly ridiculed for their simplicity, the style of the novel is heavily inspired by the inventive wordplay of advertising slogans. Octave denounces advertising media for its effect on language and communication, yet also shows an admiration for its humor and cleverness. The

reluctance among writers and literary critics to admit that advertising is witty, inventive, and ironic manifests itself in *99 francs*, which contradicts its claim that the advertising industry is nothing more than an asinine propaganda machine. The poetic nature of advertising is reflected in the narrative style of the novel, which borrows heavily from commercial language. The novel's desire to distinguish itself from advertising media by denouncing its simpleminded and superficial communication style conflicts with its mimicry of the clever wordplay that characterizes contemporary commercials.

Beigbeder argues that advertising has created a meaningless, empty language where chic expressions act much like brand names, reflecting the social status of the speaker but communicating little substance. During the awards ceremony for the advertising industry, we see a long list of dialogue from anonymous speakers: "Überfashion", "J'adore l'idée mais pas l'exé" (228). The inconsequential words are thrown about in order to promote the speaker's trendiness, a response to the logic of fashion and the pressure to compete on the public stage in terms of cultural knowledge and social status. Language today is synonymous with products, designed to become obsolete and evolving rapidly to generate desire for the latest and most trendy item. Octave explains the jargon of the advertising business, noting that "le mot 'slogan' est complètement has-been. Aujourd'hui on dit 'accroche' ou 'titre'" (48). The substance of language has been undermined, and words now function as mere markers of fashion.

Beigbeder positions this commercial language as the antithesis of meaningful discourse. Commercials represent obstacles to communication: there are several instances in the novel where long lists of advertising slogans interrupt the flow of the story (52, 84, 280-282). Like the constant presence of advertising in everyday life, these

slogans are intrusive and unwelcome. They fragment the story, as do the fictional commercials that divide the separate parts of the book. While talking on the phone with his call girl Tamara, Octave is horrified to discover that advertising jingles are punctuating their conversation: the cell phone company offers these ads in exchange for free calls (142). The coherency of dialogue is interrupted by slogans whose interference leads Octave to end the conversation abruptly, demonstrating the conflict between meaningful communication and the senselessness of advertising. As Octave states, “On avait remplacé le Logos par des logos [...]” (61). Advertising produces a schizophrenic discourse that impedes the development of coherent thought.

Yet what undermines this critique of commercial language is the way in which Beigbeder’s own writing style is thoroughly immersed in advertising. His aphorisms and ironic expressions reflect the same wordplay common in commercial slogans: “Voilà pourquoi Octave est passé d’HP en HP – d’Hôtel Particulier en Hôpital Psychiatrique” (119), “Je te suis fidèle: tu es la seule personne que j’ai envie de tromper” (69). Though his writing targets advertising in its attack, these witty one-liners are precisely what characterizes advertising discourse. Beigbeder treats language like a plastic material that he can mold for humorous or thought-provoking effect. After redefining love as a disease of the lungs rather than the heart, Octave declares, “Je suis votre professeur d’éducation phtisique” (148). These puns appear frequently in the novel and deliver a dose of ironic humor in what is otherwise a rather grim depiction of modern-day life. Beigbeder creates unusual or unexpected words (referring to the beachcombers in Miami as “des pamelaandersons de toutes tailles, des jeanclaudevandammes en veux-tu en voilà” (170)), playing with the accepted rules of language to create new turns of phrase. This

linguistic play is also typical of commercials; in his book *The Discourse of Advertising*, Guy Cook demonstrates how advertising deviates from language conventions by using graphological innovation and word coinage, misspelling, puns, ungrammaticality, and sustained ambiguity. The sort of linguistic deviation that Cook defines as a common feature of advertising is the hallmark of Beigbeder's writing style and the primary element of humor in his novels.

99 francs is full of quotable phrases, and many of the sentences serve as punch lines that summarize and punctuate the novel's larger message. Octave's narrative is a fragmented and heterogeneous form whose basic unit is that of the sentence. Remarking on the advertising professionals aboard an airplane, Octave remarks, "ils craignent davantage les krachs boursiers que les crashes aériens" (129). The artfulness of this sentence, opposing two words borrowed from German and English in two different registers, is so noteworthy that one wonders whether it might be the sentence driving this scene rather than the inverse. As Beigbeder notes, "Pour moi, un écrivain c'est quelqu'un qui collectionne les phrases" (ibid). His well-crafted one-liners have become a trademark of his prose. In his popular book of literary criticism, *La Littérature Sans Estomac*, Pierre Jourde praises Beigbeder for his "citations d'esprit" (88). But while Jourde attributes these clever sentences to the courtly tradition of French *esprit*, the focus on the sentence as a powerful and economical means of communication also reflects the influence of advertising taglines. Capturing the interest of the reading or listening public through the use of a one-liner is undeniably the specialty of the advertising industry, and Beigbeder employs the same tactic for concise and clever communication in his writing style.

Equally importantly, the verbal play of *99 francs* resembles advertising in its desire to persuade the reader. This is a novel that intends to alter the reader's point of view, and many of these statements are rhetorical strategies that imprint the novel's message onto the reader's memory. For instance, chapter five of the "vous" section begins, "Vous êtes les produits d'une époque. Non. Trop facile d'incriminer l'époque. Vous êtes des produits tout court" (241). The reader is targeted by the repetition of a phrase that plays with the connotation of being a historical product or a commercial one. The statement interpolates the reader much as a commercial defines its consumers' particular tastes and desires. *99 francs* may not be selling a product, but it is selling an ideological message through its crafty wordplay.

To dismiss this language as mere parody of commercial culture would be to ignore the way that Beigbeder incorporates this sort of discourse in his other novels. Though perhaps to a lesser extent than *99 francs*, *Windows on the World* also toys with language to invent clever and memorable phrases. In his essay, "Effondrements: Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*", Lawrence R. Schehr draws attention to the way that Beigbeder invents a new lexicon to describe the events of September 11th, notably words such as "attourrissage" and "immeublir". While Schehr interprets this creativity as a response to the crisis of representation following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the word play cited here is not so far removed from that of *99 francs*. For instance, Octave refers to himself as a liberal revolutionary dressed in designer clothes, coining the term "Gucche" to create a cross-breed of Che Guevara and Gucci (33). This language is quite simply a marker of beigbederian writing.

It is no secret that Beigbeder himself was a copywriter for a successful advertising firm. *99 francs* is an autofictional work based on his own life, and Octave is his fictional alter ego. That Beigbeder's writing style would be heavily influenced by his advertising work should come as no surprise. In *99 francs*, Octave compares the two professions, suggesting that it was his love of writing that initially attracted him to advertising: "J'aime imaginer des phrases. Aucun métier ne donne autant de pouvoir aux mots. Un rédacteur publicitaire, c'est un auteur d'aphorismes qui se vendent" (48). The boundary between the linguistic play of advertising and literary writing is fluid. In fact, Octave argues that writing advertisements presents a greater challenge than being a newspaper journalist, if only because the ad must be approved (and possibly modified) by an entire series of editors and market research analysts (46). Advertising therefore constitutes a demanding form of creative expression, one with exacting standards and tremendous influence.

Like many of the novels in this study, *99 francs* negotiates a murky territory between distinguishing itself from media and absorbing its cultural forms. The author's ambivalence toward the language of advertising is likely the result of a conflict between seeing this language as clever, hip, and effective while associating it with the manipulation of consumer culture. At the end of the novel, the narrative apocalyptically dissolves into a stream of commercial slogans, illustrating the way that the language of advertising has monopolized all forms of communication. And yet the similarity between Beigbeder's writing and the discourse of advertising also suggests that as a form of expression, advertising is highly inventive and engaging for its audience.

Beigbeder truly is a media insider, and his intimacy with the advertising profession makes him keenly aware of its strategies of representation. While he borrows the rhetorical techniques of commercial media, he is intent on defining the novel as a transparent medium that lays bare its constructed nature and that opposes the edited, stylized, and retouched illusions of advertising with its real and honest message. For Beigbeder, authenticity is what marks the novel's distinguishing trait and what gives it an important role amid a culture of manipulation and simulacra.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a driving force in *99 francs*, in both the sense of genuineness and factuality. Octave presents a brutally honest demeanor, shocking and offending readers with his open disclosure of his own transgressions. The detailed accounts of his drug abuse, sexual exploits, and declining mental health give the impression that he has nothing to hide. While the extent of Octave's deviance is likely an exaggeration, Beigbeder goes to great lengths to validate the truthfulness of his story, incorporating elements of autobiography and essay in order to support his arguments. Like some of the other novels in this study (namely *J'habite* and *Allah superstar*), this one legitimates its arguments by connecting the narrative to its extra-diegetic reality. This is a novel that distinguishes itself from other media by its attempt to be truthful.

Beigbeder appeals to a strong need for authenticity amidst a culture defined by simulacra, Photoshopped images, and self-conscious performance. He identifies a desire among consumers of media for authentic, immediate experience, precisely because so much of media content appears fabricated and falsified. Bolter and Grusin argue that the increasing mediatization of everyday experience encourages "the desire to get past the

limits of representation and to achieve the real” (53). The more we distance ourselves from immediate experience the more we thirst to un-mediate and return to a more honest form of perception. The yearning to push past the illusions of representation explains the appeal of reality TV, which authenticates its narrative by claiming to be unscripted and portrays everyday people rather than actors. Even television audiences are asking for a more authentic form of programming rather than the fictive, stylized, and highly produced entertainment that for so long characterized television content.

For the novel, authenticity entails recognizing the fact that fiction is a means of indirect representation rather than a clear window onto reality. An authentic narrative is one that draws attention to its own construction, keeping the reader at a distance from its story in order to create critical awareness of the experience of representation. In the realm of media, this is what Bolter and Grusin term *hypermediation*; the authors explain that stressing the mediation of a medium promises a greater “authenticity of experience”. They write,

In its epistemological sense, hypermediacy is opacity – the fact that knowledge of the world comes to us through media. The viewer acknowledges that she is in the presence of a medium and learns through acts of mediation or indeed learns about mediation itself. The psychological sense of hypermediacy is the experience that she has in and of the presence of media; it is the insistence that the experience of the medium is itself an experience of the real. (70)

Hypermediation grounds the user (or reader) in reality by eschewing the illusions of immersive experience; one looks AT the medium rather than THROUGH it.

99 *francs* hypermediates by thematizing the act of writing in the narrative and the organization of the text. Octave references the book that he is writing (ostensibly 99 *francs* itself), to acknowledge the act of representation and the process of constructing the novel. He writes, “En général, quand on commence un livre, il faut tâcher d’être

attachant et tout, mais je ne veux pas travestir la vérité: je ne suis pas un gentil narrateur” (19). The “truth” here is both an effect of Octave’s authenticity of character (that he does not pretend to be more charming than he really is) and the fact that he acknowledges his role as a narrator within his story. Beigbeder further disrupts the illusion of mimesis with his highly structured organization of the novel (six chapters, each corresponding to a different personal pronoun – *je, tu, il, nous, vous, ils*, further divided into seven subsections) and the use of epigraphs and dedications. The reader is constantly reminded that he or she is processing the story through a literary form of representation. The novel also relies heavily on intertextual references to other works of literature, poems, songs, and slogans to emphasize its own status as a text.

Octave is clearly suspicious of representation that hides its own process and motives. Authenticity demands transparency; the narrative of *99 francs* is by no means subtle, as Octave spells out for the reader the thoughts, behaviors, and incentives that are lurking beneath the surface. The book is a means of revealing the truth and confronting the reader in a direct way. For example, Octave describes the situation of the consumer: “Votre désir est le résultat d’un investissement qui se chiffre en milliards d’euros. C’est moi qui décide aujourd’hui ce que vous allez vouloir demain” (19). This cynical bluntness also marks the description of the other characters in the novel and any attempt to project a misleading façade. Odile, the editing intern, is presented as follows: “Elle n’aime que l’argent et la célébrité mais fait semblant d’être naïve. Les nouvelles filles font toutes ça: garder toujours les lèvres entrouvertes et les yeux ébaubis comme Audrey Marney dans une série photo de Terry Richardson; actuellement, le sommet de l’arrivisme consiste à feindre l’innocence” (125). Everywhere he looks, Octave sees

dissimulation and falseness. It becomes his mission to expose the ugly, brutal truth rather than falling into the same superficial seductiveness he sees around him.

Aside from the clever aphorisms discussed in the previous section, much of the narrative is straightforward and unpoetic. The language is occasionally vulgar, both because it is unrefined and because it references explicit acts of sexuality and bodily functions. There is little subtlety in affirmations such as, “La publicité a fait élire Hitler” (85), yet *99 francs* is full of these sorts of shocking, blunt assertions. This unpolished style is characteristic of “transgressive novels” like *99 francs* that seek to break down the pleasant but misleading façades of contemporary western culture. As Sabine van Wesemael writes in her essay, “Le potentiel transgressif de l’art contemporain”, “Les romanciers transgressifs écrivent des scènes brèves, emploient un vocabulaire limité et ils ont une très profonde aversion de la métaphore, du symbole, de l’allégorie et du simili comme si de tels procédés étaient inadéquats pour une génération nourrie de télévision et de produits de surconsommation” (180). To adopt a more romantic or poetic aesthetic would compromise the authenticity of these novels vis-à-vis their skeptical and jaded audience.

Though it is all too easy to dismiss the style of the novel as poor writing, *99 francs* does interrogate the status of representation as it relates to both media and literature. If the novel is to fulfill the role of being the media’s counterpoint, should it avoid the illusions of aesthetics? There is undeniably a tension here between the poetic function and the message; Octave wants to strip the prose of its superficial casing to reveal the pure message, yet this adversely affects the style of the writing. This perhaps explains the hesitation of critics to accept Beigbeder’s novel as *literature*: this is a novel

whose expressed purpose is to reveal a bare truth behind the sugarcoated message, and its vulgar and unpolished style is a means of reflecting its authenticity. Yet if we assume that this stripped-down, direct style appeals to a generation saturated with mediatized illusions and yearning for “authentic” narratives, then what is indeed the role of the novel once it shuns its interest in poetics?

Beigbeder suggests that the focus on aesthetics has isolated the novel from its political and cultural context. In his essay “Pour un nouveau Nouveau roman”, he asserts that the novel must move past the experimental formalism of the *Nouveau roman* and engage directly with its extradiegetic reality. He notes a revival of the realist tradition and insists that this preference for writing that speaks to the reader’s real-world experience reflects a reaction to the hyperreality of everyday life:

nous [critiques écrivains, éditeurs] sentons que quelque chose est en train de se passer. Il y a trop d’histoires fausses qui nous ennuiant: toute la journée, partout, des fictions tentent de nous arracher à notre torpeur. Le mentir est de moins en moins vrai. Le rôle du nouveau Nouveau roman est d’entrer dans les endroits interdits afin de décrire ce que nul ne décrit (*Frédéric Beigbeder et ses doubles*, 48).

Ironically then, it is the role of literary fiction to reveal the truth, and to point to immediate, real social problems that are so often neglected by the media in favor of “false stories”. In *99 francs*, Octave iterates this message by designating literature as the privileged vehicle to inform the public: “Tout écrivain est un cafteur. Toute littérature est délation. Je ne vois pas l’intérêt d’écrire des livres si ce n’est pas pour cracher dans la soupe” (29-30).

Conveying information about the real world in an effort to be as genuine and truthful as possible, however, entails stretching the limits of literary fiction. *99 francs* is part narrative, part essay; the flow of the story is often interrupted by Octave’s meditation

on social and economic problems, one whose arguments are supported by facts and real-world figures. The second chapter of the second section (*tu*) begins with a stream of information testifying to the unnatural lifestyle of modern-day society and the homogenization of agriculture: “Autrefois il existait soixante variétés de pommes: aujourd’hui n’en subsistent que trois (la golden, la verte et la rouge)” (75). Octave mentions animal husbandry, the profit margin and ingredients of Coca-Cola, and the antibiotics present in cow’s milk. The informational quality of these sections prevails over their poetics, and the reader is aware that Octave is using these facts as illustrations of his thesis concerning the decadence of consumer society.

From a literary perspective, these supporting arguments present the same frustrations that Susan Suleiman attributes to *authoritarian fictions*: redundancy, paternalism, and simplification of meaning (*Authoritarian Fictions*). Beigbeder is undeniably using this work to convince the reader of his point of view, sacrificing the literary elements that generally distinguish sophisticated literature (pluralism of meaning, engagement of the reader in producing the text, emphasis on the sign rather than the referent). And yet Beigbeder’s novel suggests that what matters for contemporary readers conditioned by media is not what mattered for readers of the *Nouveau roman*: while Roland Barthes delineated the elements of the “text” to push the work of literature beyond its formal limits (“From Work to Text”), Beigbeder seems to dismiss these aesthetic considerations as irrelevant compared to the more important task of engaging the written work in its real-world context. The pendulum appears to have swung away from the formalism of Robbe-Grillet and toward Sartre’s *littérature engagée*.

In his quest for authenticity, Beigbeder seems to have particularly embraced the notion of commitment that Sartre outlines in *What is Writing?* Sartre writes, “The ‘committed’ writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change” (37). Octave publishes his novel in order to be fired by his advertising firm, fictionalizing (or documenting) the situation of Beigbeder, who was also a copywriter promptly dismissed by his agency following the publication of *99 francs*. It is unclear what elements of the story are purely imagined and which ones are reflections of Beigbeder’s own life experience. The reader can likely assume that Octave’s aversion to his profession closely mirrors Beigbeder’s own reaction to the industry that he chose to discredit in his book. Beigbeder thus emphasizes his commitment to his ideas through autofiction, blending elements of his own life into his written work and again pushing the limits of fiction in order to authenticate the narrative.

Autofiction as it pertains to authenticity deserves closer examination; this genre has indelibly marked French fiction over the past few decades and given rise to various debates concerning authorial narcissism, the public persona of the writer, voyeurism, and truth. One is tempted to know exactly what elements of these stories are verifiably true and what aspects are exaggerated or outright invented. The genre plays on the reader’s desire for a more authentic narrative; while autofiction is not bound by Philippe Lejeune’s “pact” between author and reader, it does offer a sense of truthfulness to what would otherwise be an imagined story. One could also argue that autofiction is even more authentic than traditional autobiography, in that it overtly acknowledges its status as a story rather than purporting to represent factual reality. For Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the term in 1977, vacillating between fiction and autobiography conveys the idea

that truth is constructed rather than dubiously “discovered”, as it is in autobiographies where the author finds his or her true self through the act of writing the text (*Autobiographiques*, 69 and 78). Autofiction thus benefits from a double authenticity: the narrative appears more authentic because it is grounded in the author’s own experience, while the story itself does not purport to be entirely factual and is thus validated by a literary standard of truth rather than a strict conformity to facts. The hybrid nature of the genre protects it from accusations of falseness or a lack of credibility.

99 francs plays with this ambiguity between fiction and reality: the novel reaches past its own diegetic limits, commenting on events in the real world and situating itself within a specific moment in history. As Chris Reynolds-Chikuma points out in his article, “La Fiction d’Affaires”, the title of *99 francs* reflects this threshold between the text and the extradiegetic world, referencing the price of the book as well as its *fin de siècle* context (460). The end of the novel documents its time and place of writing (“Paris, 1997-2000”), then includes a separate page referencing its fictional soundtrack and adaptation as a virtual reality program. Beigbeder wants to challenge the insularity of novelistic fiction, bringing it into contact with the social and economic systems in which it is produced. The paratextual elements (such as the introductory page indicating that “the names have been changed to protect the guilty”) and the autofictional nature of the narrative question the notion that novels present nothing more than “false stories”. There is a hesitation throughout this work between treating the scenes as products of the imagination and real events. The company featured as one of Octave’s clients, “Madone”, bears striking resemblance to “Danone”, a real dairy company that produces a low-fat cheese similar to the “Maigrelette” in *99 francs*. The company’s 1998 profits are

listed in francs and euros, and the appearance of its headquarters is described in detail. Fact and fiction blur together, interrogating the book's generic marker, *roman*.

The novel's unique purview as a genre that can disclose the truth and convey a sense of authenticity entails an ethical obligation. Because the novel does not rely on commercial advertising, the novelist is able to voice opinions that would be inadmissible on television, radio, or through the popular press. Contrary to the idea that the novel is a tasteful and edifying genre, Beigbeder points out that novels can portray much more vulgar or violent content. In commenting on the film adaptation of *99 francs*, Beigbeder points out, "Evidemment on ne peut pas adapter littéralement le livre puisque c'est un livre où il y a de la pornographie, où il y a beaucoup de drogues, où il est question quand même de la prostitution du monde [...]. Si on l'adaptait littéralement, ce serait inderdit aux moins de dix-huit ans et des problèmes se poseraient" (*Doubles*, 20). Relative to the censorship of broadcast media and film, the novel is an outlet for unrestrained public expression. These two facets of the novel – its ethical obligation and its potential for transgression – come together to create a paradox: an ethical social commentary by way of obscenity.

Ethics and Obscenity

Obscenity and ethics have become recurring themes in contemporary French literature. *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* documents an international wave of interest in narratives marked by transgression, violence, and conflict, from Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* to Michel Houellebecq's *Plateforme*. Some theorists attribute the proliferation of "extreme" narratives to the *fin de siècle*; Sabine van Wesemael argues that these narratives enact a response to a decadent century whose pursuit of progress has

led to physical and moral degeneration (*Michel Houellebecq*, 34). The sense that traditional values are being undermined leads to an anti-modernist stance that refuses scientific and technological advancement as well as their social effects. These are the novels of the non-place, of alienated individuals who feel no connection to their surroundings or society, of a hopeless world with no refuge. The social structure they represent is that of Baudrillard's technological apocalypse, aptly described by William Bogard in his article "Closing Down the Social":

The ecstatic fascination with extremes marks the essential immorality and wasteful excess of a culture caught up in the delirium of random change and saturated with information to the point of implosion, where sexuality spirals into pornography, vision into obscenity, and the sense of history and tradition is lost in the intoxication of the moment (4).

Morality fails to restrain the increasing demand for intensification and transgression in a culture overwhelmed by information, where content must be ever more outrageous to successfully vie for the public's attention. The Extreme Novel seeks to hold a mirror to this decadent culture and bring its excesses and depravations to light.

The present-day focus of Extreme Novels suggests that historically, the Western World is experiencing a moment of trauma or crisis. In Houellebecq and Beigbeder's novels there is a sense that the traditional fabric of social life is crumbling, disintegrating the values that once made social relations, political engagement, and cultural production meaningful. Capitalism and materialist ideology have superseded love, friendship, independent thought, and investment in the social welfare of others. As Michel Houellebecq writes in *Interventions 2*,

[...] nous vivions non seulement dans une économie de marché, mais plus généralement dans une *société de marché*, c'est-à-dire un espace de civilisation où l'ensemble des rapports humains, et pareillement l'ensemble des rapports de l'homme au monde, sont médiatisés par le biais d'un calcul

numérique simple faisant intervenir l'attractivité, la nouveauté et le rapport qualité-prix (27).

The sense that all human relations are now mediated by capitalist exchange also defines the theme of *99 francs*, where prostitution, advertising slogans, and the pursuit of wealth step in as poor substitutes for more meaningful values. Money is the only metric of worth.

These novels portray an ethically degraded society, and many of them do so by representing violence and obscenity. The question of how ethics ties into the portrayal of violence is a significant one, as three of the novels in this study – *99 francs*, *Allah superstar*, and *Acide sulfurique* – enact scenes of violence in order to elicit an ethical or affective response from the reader. Television is known for its dramatization and sensationalizing of violence and transgression; how does the novel differ in its representation of violence, and how does it comment on media and distinguish itself from it by representing violence differently?

In his book *Violent Affect*, Marco Abel suggests that critics, in confronting the representation of violence in literature or film, should ask what the violence *does* rather than what it *represents*. Instead of seeking to judge violence on moral terms, it is more productive to investigate how it operates and what effects it produces on its readers. Abel specifically insists that the affective dimension of literary and cinematic violence should be explored; the ethics of these fictional portrayals is a result of the visceral response elicited from the audience. Thus what matters is not the meaning of the violence – whether it satirizes the decadence of consumer culture, for instance – but rather how it affects the reader and how it engages his or her sense of response-ability.

99 francs is a text that abounds in violence: the systematic exploitation of consumers, the symbolic violence of misogyny and racism, and the direct violence of murder and suicide. One could even argue that the commercials that interrupt the flow of the narrative commit a textual violence in that they rupture the continuity of the story. The fourth part of the novel, however, seeks to reach a pinnacle of violence in its portrayal of the brutal murder of Mrs. Ward. This section is introduced by a quote from Theodore Kaczynski: “Afin de présenter notre message avec quelque chance de produire une impression durable sur le public, nous avons dû tuer des gens” (165). The quote suggests that the murder of Mrs. Ward is committed as a form of terrorism that seeks to send a message to the general public.

Whether the incident leaves a lasting impression, however, is questionable: the sheer quantity of violence in this novel fails to make this event stand apart. The reader does not viscerally experience this scene; like the guards in the novel who watch the murder on the security monitor, we are kept at a distance. For the perpetrators of the crime as for the reader, this is a moment of affectless brutality. The reader is not encouraged to identify with either the killers or their victim, leaving him or her in a position of disinterest. The event fails to deliver the shock it sets out to create.

The murder of Mrs. Ward elucidates the violence present throughout the novel – the obscenity of the pornographic scenes, the greed and corruption of those in power, the perversity of the empire of fashion. So many scenes in *99 francs* are designed to disturb or provoke, their vulgarity described in offensive detail, that this supposed transgressive zenith seems natural, another result of the corrupt moral system in which we live. The reader, like Octave, is brought to the point of no longer differentiating between these

different instances of violence. Once the novel reaches the scene with Mrs. Ward, the reader may very well be bored by these unsentimental displays of excess.

This boredom is perhaps not a failure of the narrative but rather its intended effect; the experience of reading *99 francs* illuminates the flatness and meaninglessness of media culture as it is portrayed in Baudrillard's *America*⁸, where difference has been eradicated by simulacra and reproducibility. The homogenization of culture by media prevents any ethical judgment; standing before a depthless swarm of meaningless signifiers, the individual becomes apathetic, unable to produce a genuine affective or ethical response. As Baudrillard writes of the American culture that represents the epitome of this hyperreal nightmare:

If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgment, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgment and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. [...] The violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum. (67)

It is no surprise that Beigbeder chose Miami as the stage for the murder scene: this capital of debauchery and superficiality stands as a symbol of the excess of media culture. This is a society so divorced from reality – bodies transformed by plastic surgery, people living through advertising and fashion – as to have no depth for ethical judgment. As Octave writes, “Nous comprenon qu’à Miami nous sommes à l’intérieur d’une publicité géante. Ce n’est plus la publicité qui copie la vie, c’est la vie qui copie la publicité” (172). The hyperreal accepts the image in place of truth.

⁸ Beigbeder was undoubtedly familiar with *America* and cited it in an interview (*Frédéric Beigbeder et ses doubles*, 29).

What *99 francs* adds to this ethical debate is the sense that consumer society produces a violence similar to the physical brutality of murder. By creating an obscene narrative that anticlimactically leads to physical brutality, Beigbeder stresses the ethical flatness of contemporary culture. The murder of Mrs. Ward is just another moment in a series of abuses, no more or less shocking than the prostitution of women, the fetish porn of infecting unknowing victims with AIDS, or the exploitation of the underprivileged in order to procure more wealth for the rich.

The affective impact of a work of literature depends not only on the economy of transgression (the number of violent instances in the novel) but also the rate at which the violent acts happen. Marco Abel and Paul Virilio attribute ethical response to speed of perception. In his commentary on *American Psycho*, Abel contrasts the slow, monotonous repetition of the non-violent scenes in the narrative to the fast-paced excitement of the brutal murders. He writes, “It is not so much the ‘excessive’ violence of Ellis’s *American Psycho* that creates its affect overload; instead, the novel achieves this intense response through a careful modulation of slowness and speed (intensities), of endless repetition of items and repetitive scenes of gore” (48). The literary representation of violence produces an impact on the reader through the regulation of speed, for speed is what determines whether the event strikes at a spectacular or an ethical level. This modulation of speed gives art and literature an important role given the accelerated events in contemporary culture and the inability to slow down to an “ethical speed” in day-to-day life. In *Art and Fear*, Paul Virilio points out, “They say the purpose of ethics is to slow down the rate at which things happen. Confronted by the general speeding-up of phenomena in our hyper-modern world, this curbing by conscience seems pretty

feeble” (27). Ethical consciousness requires a moment of reflection in which to grasp the consequences of an act, to weigh the alternatives, and to feel the impact of one’s decision. Art and literature can either resist that speed or mimic it in their representation of violence.

In contrast to the disturbing variations of speed that elicit an affective response in *American Psycho*, *99 francs* moves at the speed of hyperreal society. This is an eventful novel where each page strives to surpass the previous one in shock value. As a result, there is no pause in which the reader can fully contemplate the meaning of any singular incident. The result is an equivalence among the various events and a sense that none of them carry any particular affective value. This indifference appears to be an intentional effect of the novel, as one of the guiding plot threads is Octave’s desire to be fired from his position by transgressing an ethical limit. Instead, he discovers that there is no limit – any transgression is merely absorbed by the economy of excess.

The question of how works of literature engage ethics is a theme that traverses the next few chapters. With *99 francs* or any extreme novel, the writer runs the risk of being accused of complicity with the sensationalism of media. How do writers use violence to shock the reader into an ethical response without making this violence seem gratuitous or thrilling? Obscenity can be an effective way of breaking through the reader’s complacency, and yet it so easily degenerates into the same attraction to scandal that drives much of the content of television programming and newspaper headlines. The challenge lies in representing media culture in a critical way without reproducing its effects.

Conclusion

99 francs is often characterized as a *fin de siècle* novel, one that looks to the new millennium with anxiety and unease. However, the novel is perhaps more intriguing if situated historically on the eve of September 11th. The novel seems to eerily predict the catastrophic event:

Et nous qui répétions sans arrêt notre credo gramsciste: “Pour détourner l’avion, il faut commencer par monter dedans.” Quelle ironie du sort! A présent que nous entrons dans le cockpit, nos grenades à la main, et que nous nous apprêtons à donner des ordres au pilote sous la menace de nos mitraillettes, nous découvrons qu’il n’y avait pas de pilote. Nous voulions détourner un avion que personne ne savait conduire (206).

Beigbeder would go on to write another novel, *Windows on the World*, in which he imagines the carnage inside the Twin Towers⁹. If *99 francs* portrays the hegemonic, uncontrollable power of advertising escalating to an unstoppable level, *Windows on the World* reflects on the event that brought that hegemony to a standstill. The violence in *99 francs*, intended to provoke readers and snap them back into consciousness, becomes in *Windows on the World* a tragic reflection on the suffering that occurred within the Twin Towers. The terrorism thrown about casually and metaphorically in *99 francs* loses its lightness after the events of September 11th. Jean Baudrillard was equally influenced by the terrorist attacks, describing the collapse of the Twin Towers as proof of “the fragility of global power” (43) and ascribing to it the privileged status of an event (*The Spirit of Terrorism*, 51). It will be interesting to see whether other novels published after 2001 also reflect this change in perspective: do media transformations continue to be seen as

⁹ This is another instance of fiction going where visual media cannot. As the narrator of *Windows on the World* remarks, “Aujourd’hui les livres doivent aller là où la télévision ne va pas. Montrer l’invisible, dire l’indicible” (359).

destructive, unstoppable forces, or is there a sense that the hyperreal has somehow been defeated?

99 francs and *La Télévision* resist the influence of television, seeking to define the novel as a space that counters the toxic culture created by image media. They also show anxiety about the novel's ability to survive in a world where communication, entertainment, and aesthetic experience are increasingly determined by screens rather than books. While assaulting Mrs. Ward in Miami, one of the characters in *99 francs*, Charlie, is compelled to explain to her, "Non, Céline n'est pas une marque de chaussures. C'est un écrivain français" (197), suggesting that consumerism has undermined the cultural importance of literary figures.

Perceiving the media as a threat to literature may be related to Toussaint and Beigbeder's sense that the writer's privileged social status is disappearing. Of course, reacting to this loss of status – feeling ex-centered, in other words – depends on having been at the center, or feeling entitled to be there, in the first place. Kathleen Fitzpatrick describes the Anxiety of Obsolescence as a white male phenomenon, one that requires a centered subject to feel that his cultural privilege is being threatened (50). Minority or female authors who have never benefitted from this cultural centeredness view the media much differently; they might in fact see the recent changes in technology and information as creating new possibilities for selfhood that were not available under the modernist value system exalted by writers nostalgic for the past. How do writers who do not see the presence of media as a threat perceive its role in society? The chapters that follow offer some insight into these questions.

Chapter Three: Y.B.'s *Allah superstar*: Televisual Consciousness and National Identity

The events of September 11th arguably affected literary interpretation, particularly as it pertains to the relationship between writing and media. The attacks on the World Trade Center developed in real time and were framed by television images; Jean Baudrillard has referred to the event as one defined by spectacle, arguing that the image precedes the realization that the attack is in fact occurring in real life: “Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the *frisson* of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the *frisson* of the real is added” (*Spirit of Terrorism*, 29). The repeated image of the Twin Towers crumbling to the ground captivated audiences before any rational discourse could make sense of the event.

For writers struggling to represent September 11th, the essential question was what literature could contribute to this highly mediatized event – whether it could bring some understanding to what appeared to be an irrational and indescribable act, and whether there was anything left to say after the 24-hour news cycle laid claim to the event’s representation. In *9/11 and the Literature of Terror*, Martin Randall describes the post-9/11 period as a crisis of representation for writers: “How can a writer put into words what had already been watched by millions? What could language add to those images that they don’t already articulate? Indeed, *why* write at all given the staggering enormity of the visual symbolism?” (5). Writers struggled to contribute to the public discourse without being redundant.

Over time, however, it became apparent that the media had been telling a misrepresented or incomplete story, and this is where writers felt compelled to interject. Writing in a special edition of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* dedicated to “Literary

Responses to the War on Terror”, Robert Spencer and Anastasia Valassopoulos claim that the great strength of post-9/11 literature is its ability to contest the official narrative of the event promulgated by the media. Literature and film present a more critical and more nuanced representation of terrorism, one that investigates not only the events but also the cultural and historical context that led to them. As Spencer and Valassopoulos write, “The exploration of context, the articulation of multiple voices, the interrogation of received wisdom, the imaginative engagement with unprecedented points of view, emotion recollected in tranquility: these are all qualities that we ascribe to works of literature and film” (330). Whereas Paul Virilio lamented the fact that books could not keep up with the immediacy of live television, here Spencer and Valassopoulos suggest that the lapse in time might lead to a more critical and thoughtful consideration of the events, one that eludes those trapped in the trauma of the moment.

Yassir Benmiloud (Y.B.)’s 2003 novel *Allah superstar* reflects on the aftermath of September 11th and the social climate it leaves in its wake. Written from the perspective of a young *beur* (a French citizen of North African descent) living in the *banlieues*, the novel addresses the anti-Islamic sentiment that resonated throughout the Western world following the attacks on the World Trade Center, as well as the hostile attitude of the French media toward a minority population that it regards as foreign to its values and culture. *Allah superstar* highlights the role of the media in framing France’s Arab population as outsiders and explores the subjective frustrations of its narrator as he transforms from a fully acculturated French citizen to a radicalized Muslim terrorist.

Allah superstar thus not only addresses the post-9/11 cultural climate, but also the specific struggles of young Arabs living in France. Despite their French citizenship and

thorough immersion in French language and culture, many *beurs* find themselves marginalized and seen as perpetual outsiders (Eid, 175). Their dark skin and Muslim religion is a target of discrimination, both economically and socially. Islamophobia escalated following September 11th, leading to the 2005 riots in the *banlieues* that brought the socioeconomic disparity and discrimination faced by *beur* minorities to a climax. The media have a tendency to frame these disenfranchised youth as delinquents, criminals, or terrorists, supporting the stereotypes that deny this group full acceptance into French society.

Allah superstar interrogates the images that define the status of young *beurs* in France, and in doing so it brings to the forefront the novel's potential for complicating media discourse and representation. Y.B. develops a more complex portrait of media viewing than either Beigbeder or Toussaint; Kamel, the protagonist and narrator of *Allah superstar*, sees television as a political and ideological medium, one that interacts dialogically with his social and political reality rather than divorcing him from the Real or obscuring his lived experience with simulacra. Kamel is a very different telespectator in that watching television inspires him to act; he interprets media messages and uses them to his own political ends, a distant cry from the hypnotic or pacifying effect often attributed to watching television by media theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Theodor Adorno, or Paul Virilio. The weight of Kamel's family history and his ethnic background tie him to reality in a way that prevents him from floating off into simulacra. While the media images that Kamel consumes are enticing and seductive, he can never become completely absorbed by them. Kamel's social and political reality prevents him from

achieving his dream of being a rootless tree whose branches can stretch without limit (113).

This political way of viewing television may in large part reflect the marginalized status of *Allah superstar*'s protagonist and the ethnic background of the novel's author. Alterity factors into the way that Kamel, the protagonist-narrator, sees the media in a way that it does not for a spectator who identifies with the images on television and who feels like a full participant in the cultural ideology that they promote. Contrary to the desire to escape media expressed in *La Télévision* and *99 francs*, *Allah superstar* presents a yearning to be included in the popular culture of television. Media representation defines national identity in a way that excludes certain members, leaving them longing for inclusion and bitter at the discriminatory way they are positioned as outsiders. We will explore how marginalization affects the novel's portrayal of media, and how it illuminates a unique function for the novel in expressing minority viewpoints not voiced on mainstream media.

Instead of opposing the literary world to media-centric contemporary culture (as Toussaint arguably does in *La Télévision*), *Allah superstar* speaks through a consciousness fully immersed in media culture. The narrative presents a collage of movies, television shows, music, history, and literature that conveys the way that various influences intersect in the sense-making process of a media-saturated teenager. Kamel's long-winded sentences bring together politics, personal history, and media in a way that recontextualizes and reinterprets each of those elements. The variety of influences that he is exposed to also creates contradictions in his identity that are elucidated by the narrative structure of the novel.

Allah superstar calls for the political function of literature in contesting the dominant narrative of mainstream media. It exploits the novel's potential for subversion and contradiction by revealing the complexity behind Kamel's decision to become a suicide bomber, implicating the reader in a social process that is often portrayed by the media with defensive distance. Y.B. entangles us in Kamel's narrative, bringing the isolated experience of a young *beur* into relief and allowing him to direct his own framing rather than falling prey to the narration of the media.

Anchoring the Media in the Real

In the two novels studied previously, television viewers were to a large extent defined by Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality: absorbed by the television set, they were isolated from the real world and hypnotized by simulacra, no longer seeing the images on the screen as representations but instead mistaking them for reality. *99 francs* in particular saw its mission as penetrating this false world and emphasizing the gap between commercial images and their real-world consequences.

Allah superstar diverges from this model by tethering its protagonist to the Real; much as Kamel would like to leave behind his past and realize his ambition of becoming a celebrity comedian, his media-centric persona comes into conflict with the values of his ethnic community. Unlike the cliché image of the isolated viewer sitting in an empty room watching television, Kamel is integrated within a local ethnic community that counters the influence of the media and challenges the messages that he absorbs from popular culture. Kamel processes media through the lens of his own ethnic and religious identity: he is highly attentive to the way that Arabs are portrayed on television (“jamais j’ai vu un Arabe qui a un César du meilleur acteur” (12)), and knows that these

representations influence the way he is perceived in the eyes of the French public: “tu te demandes si je suis musulman pratiquement comme mon père, si je fais la prière, le ramadan, les ceintures d’explosifs, les tournantes dans les mosquées-caves sur des mineures excisées par des imams sans papiers [...]” (16). The media is less of an escape for Kamel than a window onto the way he is seen by the French public and the social roles that are available for him to play. When youth of Arab origin do appear on television, they are shown in handcuffs being escorted by the police or in standup comedy, leading Kamel to understand that his only two options for integration are being a comedian or being a threat: “si tu es bronzé dans ce pays tu as que deux possibilités: soit tu fais peur soit tu fais rire” (52).

Kamel understands that he is interpellated by the media and that the images he sees on the screen affect his everyday reality. There is constant dialogue here between media representation and the lived world, indicating that media is not merely a simulacra divorced from real experience but rather a significant influence on lived reality. The function of the novel, then, is not to drive a wedge between illusion and reality, but instead to probe the subjectivity of an individual responsive to both the media and the demands of his lived world. This dynamic between reality and virtuality is evident from the first two sentences of the novel. Kamel introduces himself by declaring his ambition to penetrate the media: “Moi ce que je veux c’est soit star de cinéma, soit comique à la mode, soit au pire animateur populaire avec *Télé 7 Jours*” (9). However, Kamel knows that it won’t be easy for him to achieve a successful career in show business, and he qualifies his aspirations in the introductory sentence with the follow-up: “Mais pour les Arabes c’est plus facile d’entrer à Al-Quaïda qu’à TF1 à cause des quotas” (9). The

seduction of the media fails to obscure Kamel's real exclusion from the public sphere. Y.B. argues that media is not merely absorbed by the spectator, and that it instead enters into dialogical and often conflictual relationships with his or her real-world experience.

Seeing media as a discourse that shapes reality rather than divorcing from it dramatically alters not only the portrayal of media in the novel, but also the role of the novel in a mediatized society. The novel no longer needs to reconnect the reader to the real world outside the image; instead, it needs to complicate a mode of representation that is often brief, commercially-driven, and corresponds to the reigning social ideology. As Kamel reminds his reader, the mainstream representation of Arabs leaves little room for the expression of a complex self. Arabs are seen as threats or comedians, existing to terrify or entertain the public but not to be seen as full subjects. The novel serves as a place where this limited portrait can be nuanced and individualized.

We are invited to hear Kamel's side of the story as it is told through his own voice. The unique ability of fictional narrative to represent subjectivity counters the objectification of Arabs in French media. Kamel's narrative seeks to overcome the idea that *beurs* are outsiders to French culture. Kamel speaks much like any teenager, employing colloquialisms that reflect his indoctrination in French culture and making references that serve as reminders that he is well-versed in the same shows and movies enjoyed by the mainstream public. It is easy to relate to Kamel – he speaks the same language as the reader, refers to the same shows, and makes inside jokes that only a fully-fledged French person could understand.

Unlike the stereotypical portrayals of Arabs in the media, Kamel's character is multifaceted if not downright contradictory – it would be difficult to sum him up, and the

reader is simultaneously led to identify with him as a true character and to see him as a representative of a greater cause. Y.B. refers to him as “un vrai-faux personnage”, someone who is constructed to represent an –ism (colonialism, racism, etc.) (“Au Lecteur”). And yet this representative quality does not deny the fact that Kamel is fleshed out in a much fuller way than the limited portraits of Arabs on television. He straddles past and present, Algeria and France, religious tradition and modern-day entertainment, effectively challenging the one-sided portrayal of Arabs in the French media.

Not only is Kamel brought into sharper focus for the reader’s observation, but the reader is also pulled into the text in a personal way. In contesting the representation of the mainstream media, *Allah superstar* furthers the approach of *99 francs* in addressing the reader directly using the second person pronoun. Toward the end of the novel the reader learns that Kamel’s monologue is in fact part of his stand-up act, with the novel acting as a transcription of the live performance. The reader is a member of Kamel’s audience, acting as a witness, participant, and eventual victim.

The reader’s involvement in Kamel’s performance is key to the message of the novel: in addition to acting as a spectator to his stand-up, the reader is also implicated as an actor in creating the social injustice shown in the novel. Framing his narrative as a live show brings an immediacy to the story and a sense that as in any performance staged before an audience, the spectators are part of the act. Whereas *99 francs* portrayed the reader as the victim, attributing the blame for society’s degeneration to the advertising industry, in *Allah superstar*, the tendency to “other” Arabs in French culture is primarily responsible for Kamel’s eventual transformation from an acculturated citizen to a radical terrorist, and the reader is assumed to participate in his marginalization and

objectification. The “tu” whom Kamel addresses is an FDS (*français de souche*), someone who requires considerable explanation to understand Kamel’s background and worldview. In the end, the reader is blown up along with the other representatives of the *société de spectacle* who are present for Kamel’s stand-up act, creating a chilling finale: “Et au niveau du vécu, il te reste exactement cinq secondes, mon frère. Quatre. Trois. Deux. Un. Zéro” (253).

Bringing the spectator into the narrative and implicating him or her in the events creates a startling break from the way that terrorism is generally presented by the media. The public usually processes terrorism as a scene with various actors: the terrorists, their victims, and public officials such as police officers and government representatives. The reasons for the terrorist act are often attributed to “radicalism” or “fundamentalism” (the official report of Kamel’s actions describes the imam who orchestrated the event as “ultraradicale” (256)), and this allows the public to view the perpetrator as someone on the fringes of society who has little in common with ordinary citizens, and much less someone for whom they should feel responsible. As Slavoj Žižek argues in *Violence*, the media’s emphasis on subjective violence, “that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds”, distracts the public’s attention away from the social structures that create the symbolic and objective violence that leads to the more visible subjective acts (10). In so doing, the media blames only the agents of subjective violence without implicating the individuals responsible for the insidious social injustice that inspires the visible violent acts. *Allah superstar* challenges this representation of terrorism and suggests that ordinary citizens

are in fact also actors in this scene, generating the culture that excludes individuals like Kamel from full participation.

Jean Baudrillard stirred up a similar controversy in his essay *The Spirit of Terrorism* when he suggested that a complicity between the terrorists and the audience inspired the bombing of the Twin Towers: “Without this deep-seated complicity, the event would not have had the resonance it has, and in their symbolic strategy the terrorists doubtless know they can count on this unavowable complicity” (6). Then again, Baudrillard did not go so far as to single out his reader, using the inclusive pronoun *nous* rather than the singular *tu* used in *Allah superstar*, thereby defining the problem as a societal one rather than attributing blame to the individual. The distance separating the text from its reader has receded in *Allah superstar*; we are not indifferently observing Kamel, but are instead engaged in his world and accountable for his actions. The media is, likewise, no longer an Other separate from the reader, a force that can be isolated and studied with critical distance – the media in *Allah superstar* instead reflect the values that the reader supposedly shares, the culturally dominant ideology.

A considerable evolution has occurred from Toussaint’s *La Télévision* where it was still possible to be a media outsider. The novel stood on the periphery of televisual culture and distinguished itself from the pace and structure of television programming, espousing a literary language that distanced itself from the everyday speech one hears in the media. In 2003, this position seems no longer valid – writer and reader are both immersed in media culture and active agents within it. To eschew the language of the media or its influence is to alienate oneself from popular culture, to pretend that one’s experience is not mediated by television, Internet, newspapers, and radio.

The more persuasive position is to admit that the media both shape and reflect reality, and that the qualities most offensive to critics – commercialism, lowbrow entertainment, racism, misogyny, and conformism – are likely to find their source not in the backstage manipulation of media producers but instead the mentalities of the greater society. As Kamel's friend Bala explains, the ancestor of *Loft Story* is the colonial exposition, where blacks were put on display for public entertainment (161). To understand why a shipwreck in Africa always appears after a car crash in Europe on the evening news, one need not blame geography but rather history, and particularly the colonial experience whose exploitation of Africans was premised on their status as inferior people (162). *Allah superstar* is unique in tying current media ideology to national history and seeing it as the manifestation of public opinion. What is so disturbing about the novel is that the media messages are neither new (and thus deviating from a more glorious or authentic past) nor authoritative (turning spectators into helpless victims). What we see in the media represents public opinion forged over history, an ugly truth that cannot be attributed to technology or corporate greed.

Expressing Minority Viewpoints

Given the connection between media representation and social attitudes, it is no wonder that Kamel aspires to penetrate show business in order to gain symbolic capital and social recognition. Media presence is for him the difference between having a public identity and not existing at all: “je veux être au minimum star mais c’est pas pour la frime ou quoi, c’est pour la survie” (11). If he doesn’t achieve stardom, Kamel will become another nameless *beur* youth, “anonymous” in the eyes of society: “Mais je sais, toi tu te dis des anonymes comme moi il y en a plein les banlieues” (29). The reader understands

that “anonymes comme moi” restricts the category of nameless people to those of North African descent, assumed to be living in the poorest sections of the suburbs and contributing socially only in terms of rising unemployment and crime rates. Kamel knows that unless he infiltrates the media, he will continue to be framed as just another undesirable element in French society, lacking status or identity.

Defining media presence as the gateway to a public identity positions television in an attractive light: it is no longer a nefarious influence to flee, but rather an opportunity to gain a sense of social worth. Azouz Begag, a French cabinet minister of North African origin during the Sarkozy presidency and a sociologist who has written extensively about *beur* youth in the *banlieues*, echoes this desire for status among minority youth in France: “*Integration*. The word is now anachronistic in relation to the agenda of today’s young ethnics, for whom the issue is social recognition” (*Ethnicity and Equality*, 92). The problem is not so much access to culture – like Kamel, the *beur* youth in question were born in France, have attended French schools, and are well-versed in the values of the Republic. The problem is in fact being seen as French by society, and recognized as a fellow citizen rather than an outsider. As Kamel declares, “Moi ce que je veux c’est le respect” (32). The question for someone who feels marginalized by popular culture is not how to avoid the media but rather how to penetrate it, for in occupying the spotlight one gains recognition and acceptance.

In her book, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick uses Toni Morrison’s novels to demonstrate how the media, from the point of view of marginalized communities, represents a potential for social power and self-definition. Writers who see themselves as cultural outsiders and who aspire to have their perspective heard in the

public sphere do not disdain the media so much as they resent the gatekeepers who exclude them from it. Fitzpatrick writes, “insofar as contemporary culture holds a threat for marginalized writers, that threat lies in the culture’s failure to take their voices seriously, or even to hear them in the first place” (220). This illuminates the remarkable absence in *Allah superstar* of the Anxiety of Obsolescence that we have seen in Toussaint and Beigbeder’s novels. In *Allah superstar*, there is less emphasis on the waning of the status of novels and a greater attention to the ways that they can counter the media’s promotion of discriminatory or exclusionist discourse. The forms of new media are less reprehensible than the ideologies that they promote.

The narrative form of the novel thus emphasizes the subjective point of view of individuals who are seen as members of an outside group, and who are often depicted in images rather than given a chance to speak. Kamel knows that he is misrepresented by the media, and points to the way that journalists frame young *beurs* as criminals to sensationalize their newscasts:

Le respect c’est quand un journaliste il fait dix prises de la scène où les cow-boys de la Brigade anti-criminalité ils te mettent les pinces et dix fois ces fils de pute ils te cisailent les poignets en gros plan. Le respect c’est qu’en plus toi tu as rien à te reprocher, sinon que tu viens de palper 100 euros du journaliste en question pour jouer le truc vu que ce jour-là il y a pas de délinquance. (32)

Given that *beur* youth are commonly manipulated to play into the role of miscreants, Kamel’s narrative offers an unusual opportunity for him to write his own story rather than be defined by the media.

Reading Kamel’s narrative is all the more intriguing given that Kamel is the embodiment of a figure who is much discussed by the media yet largely misunderstood: the acculturated French citizen of Arab origin who turns to fundamentalist Islam. Born to

a French mother and more familiar with French culture than the tenets of Islam, it seems paradoxical that Kamel should suddenly turn his back on the Republic and instead adopt the radicalized views of his local Sheikh. This is, however, a commonplace transformation born from the frustration of being refused recognition by one's own country. Azouz Begag writes,

Islam is [...] a tool that can be used to inspire fear among the dominant population of the society into which young ethnics are born and of which they are legally citizens. Islam is the *quick-drying cement* of an identity that is widely visible in the media and well positioned to capitalize on the bitterness of those who have been disappointed by the republican myth of equality. (76)

There is thus a causal connection between feeling shunned by the dominant society and choosing to espouse the identity of one's ethnic community rather than the exclusionary culture of the Republic. Nonetheless, it is all too easy for the media to turn this phenomenon into evidence that Arabs are simply incapable of assimilation, and that even French citizens of Arab background should be seen as potential threats to national security.

Allah superstar stresses the way that Kamel's frustrations and struggles are undermined by the media; at the end of the novel, a short newspaper blurb describes Kamel's bombing of the Olympia Theater and reduces his lengthy narrative to another act of terrorism perpetrated by a radical Islamist. The press describes the facts of the incident but mentions none of the social and political factors that led to Kamel's actions. To use the paradoxical slogan of Kamel's standup, the media conclude that "cet homme est un terroriste" but fail to see that "ce terroriste est un homme". Little effort is made to understand Kamel and consider the circumstances that encouraged him to turn against his country and adopt the views of the radicalized Sheikh.

The novel, on the other hand, expresses the unmediated, uninterrupted expression of Kamel's narrative. There is a frank and unpolished quality to his monologue, written in the *verlan* that marks Kamel's membership in the *banlieue* of Evry and punctuated by digressions and endless, rambling sentences. His speech conveys the authenticity of someone who does not filter his ideas, and at times Kamel appears naïve and oblivious to his audience. The stylistic qualities of Kamel's voice make it clear that his narrative is a far cry from the scripted and edited stories found in media representation. There are several instances where Kamel undermines the figures of speech used in official discourse, suggesting that political language skirts around the real issues affecting French minorities. For instance, he refers to "un jeune d'origine difficile issu d'un quartier sensible d'éducation prioritaire en zone de non-droit donc un Arabe ou un Noir" (11); Kamel's frankness cuts through the media rhetoric and lays bare the racism embedded in these common euphemisms.

Allah superstar targets the media's ideology rather than its form, shifting the focus from the Anxiety of Obsolescence to the novel's role in questioning media messages. One might wonder what accounts for this difference: why is Y.B. less concerned with the medium of television than Toussaint and Beigbeder? Why doesn't he seem threatened by the competition from image media? In explaining the motivation for a writer's specific media critique, Kathleen Fitzpatrick urges readers to ask what is at stake for the novelist and how media transformations impact his or her symbolic capital. Fitzpatrick argues that the Anxiety of Obsolescence is largely a phenomenon among white males who have much to lose in the rapidly changing media environment. The opposition to television and image media can be traced back to the loss of a privileged

status and the sudden marginalization of the authorial figure who was for centuries respected and admired. Both Toussaint and Beigbeder's narrators were white males who stood on the margins of media culture and lamented the loss of the values and lifestyle associated with a more literary society. As Fitzpatrick argues, writers who identify with the canonical, established profile of the novelist have much to lose in an increasingly technologically-dominated milieu and much to gain in defending the literary tradition.

Y.B., on the other hand, is an outsider to the French literary tradition, having forged his career as a journalist in Algeria and having only recently settled in France. He makes no secret of his religious or ethnic affiliation, stating in a recent interview, "Je m'appelle Yassir Benmiloud, je suis croyant, je suis musulman" ("L'Intransigeant"). All of Y.B.'s novels deal with social and political issues concerning Algerians, including his autobiographical novel, *l'Explication* (1999). Having grounded his career in journalism focused on the political crises in Algeria, it is perhaps no surprise that Y.B.'s view of the role of the novel in French society or the impact of recent media transformations should differ from that of other notable French and European theorists and writers. Rather than fighting to maintain a noble historic past, Y.B. is fighting to change a long history of racial persecution.

Y.B. is concerned with how the media defines the status of marginalized individuals and limits their opportunities for integration and success. On the Grasset publishing website, he explains that the central question of his novel is political: "Si *l'Étranger* était un roman colonial, Allah superstar est un roman post-post-colonial, avec cette question centrale: quelle place pour les descendants des indigènes maghrébins, anciens 'sujets' de l'Empire, dans la France d'aujourd'hui ?" ("Au Lecteur"). The *société*

de spectacle is of interest insofar as it mediates the relationship between marginalized groups and the dominant cultural discourse.

The emphasis on the political objectives of Y.B.'s novel should by no means suggest that *Allah superstar* lacks in literary quality. On the contrary, its stylistic aspects are integral to depicting Kamel's consciousness and point of view. The language and structure of the novel convey the complexity of this character in a much different way than a sociological analysis, exploiting the dialogical quality of the novel (in the bakhtinian sense) and its capacity to bring subjectivity to the forefront.

An Intertextual Collage

Contrary to the familiar stereotypes of Arabs promulgated by the media, the novel portrays Kamel as a complex figure defined by his contradictions rather than his legibility. Immersed in French culture yet denied acceptance, Kamel wavers between French and Arab affiliation. At times he identifies with the French Arab community, and at others his own sense of superiority distances him from his peer group ("Bala et Sidonie, Abel et Jessica, c'est pas mon public" (47)). Regarding his stand-up routine, Kamel does not know which act to perform for his audience, whether it be the self-denigrating representation of Arab stereotypes popular with the mainstream French audience or the self-respecting act more acceptable to his peers. This ambiguity extends to Kamel's attitude toward the reader; on the one hand, Kamel addresses his reader with a high degree of informality which gives the illusion that Kamel is treating the reader as an equal, someone whom he expects to speak the same language. The fact that so much of Kamel's performance is premised on revealing personal, intimate details of his family history and private life extends this impression, and at times it is tempting to see his

narrative as a confession. The appearance of intimacy and informality falls apart at the end, however, when Kamel affirms that he knows little about his reader/audience, and that little in fact is known about him: “Et même toi et moi on a partagé quelques moments ensemble, qu’est-ce que tu sais vraiment de moi, qu’est-ce que je sais vraiment de toi?” (252). He addresses the reader as “mon frère” (253), perhaps ironically, yet sees him as a stranger.

While these inconsistencies make it difficult to understand Kamel’s individual psychology, they effectively highlight the bipolar messages and discourses that he encounters. In a notice to his readers published on the Grasset publishing house homepage, Y.B. stresses Kamel’s instability and the way that Kamel reflects his social reality: “Kamel Léon Hassani est une figure géométrique, une somme algébrique, une éponge qui absorbe tout, pour le meilleur et pour le pire, une accumulation de frustrations et d’espérances qui courent du XIX^e au XXI^e siècle” (“Au Lecteur”). The novel effectively provides a canvas where these various discourses intersect, complicating the cliché representation of Arabs adopted by the media.

Kamel’s discourse also complicates the reader’s ability to attribute his final act of terrorism to any single definable cause. Whereas a sociological, political, or psychological analysis might make an argument for Kamel’s religious fundamentalism, his economic disadvantage, or any other distinct motivation, the novel brings forth a consciousness that is much more muddled. As Žižek writes in reference to the 2005 French suburban riots,

There were no particular demands made by the protesters in the Paris suburbs. There was only an insistence on *recognition*, based on a vague, unarticulated *ressentiment*. [...] There was an irony in watching the sociologists, intellectuals, and commentators trying to understand and help. Desperately they tried to

discern the meaning of the protesters' actions: 'We must do something about the integration of immigrants, about their welfare, their job opportunities,' they proclaimed – in the process they obfuscated the key enigma the riots presented. (*Violence*, 75).

An advantage that novels hold over other media or analytical representations is this very ability to put forth the enigmatic nature of Kamel's motivation. The anger that led to the 2005 riots is already present in this narrative – Kamel senses that he is being excluded from full recognition as a French citizen. The frustration leading Kamel to turn against the French public is multi-faceted, with no single argument or proposed solution. Would it be enough to offer Kamel a job, to put more Arabs in the media spotlight, or to enact stricter measures against discrimination? None of these solutions seems to fully address Kamel's need for recognition, his need to be visible in the eyes of the Republic.

The novel's unique ability to present a contradictory and even confusing narrative enables it to put forth a more truthful account of what inspires a French citizen to turn against his country. To refer again to the question posed by novelists after 9/11: what else could possibly be said about this over-mediatized event? – here we have a function that could arguably only be carried out by the novel. By representing a consciousness that is contradictory, frustrated, and confused, *Allah superstar* brings forth a truthfulness about the current sociopolitical situation that cannot fully be addressed by a mere analysis of the facts. As Žižek writes, there is a distinction between factual truth and truthfulness. A survivor of a crime would produce an unreliable, confused and inconsistent narrative that is truthful, even if it is not factually true (*Violence*, 3). A cold, detached analysis of the same crime might produce a narrative that were factually true, but not truthful. The novel's purview in addressing current sociopolitical events may very well be the truthful accounts that can only be conveyed via a freer, more unstructured narrative form.

Yet let us remember that Kamel is not just a representative of marginalized Arab youth living in the French *banlieues* – he is also deeply immersed in media culture, and this factors heavily in understanding his contradictions and ambiguities. The reader comes to understand that much of Kamel’s identity is wrapped up in the media content he has consumed. Kamel’s speech recycles the discourse of the media, resulting in an intertextual echo of sound bites and expressions: he quotes the rapper Doc Gynéco (23) as well as other celebrities, intersperses popular English expressions like *sketch* and *street credibility* throughout his narrative (33), and refers to popular media figures (“elle filme comme Gilbert Montagné” (37)) that require the reader to share his cultural code in order to follow the story.

The juxtaposition of polarities in Kamel’s performance and his inability to maintain continuity in his self-representation point to a distinct effect of media exposure. There is a broad trend in contemporary literature seeking to portray how mediatized information disrupts the linear narrative of an individual’s identity. The Enlightenment subject has given way to an interconnected, networked self who reflects various streams of influence. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles characterizes contemporary literary subjectivity in terms of a tension between pattern and randomness. Using the example of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Hayles points to the way that “family conversations are punctuated by random bits of information emanating from the radio and TV. The punctuation points toward a mutation in subjectivity that comes from joining the focused attention of traditional novelistic consciousness with the digitized randomness of miscellaneous bits” (40). This “digitized randomness” comes across in Kamel’s narrative through his digressions and constant references to television

programming. On page 168, he jumps from thinking about Bala's "irreversible" words to the film *Irréversible* with Monica Bellucci, then Jacques Chirac, then Robert Pirès and the 2002 World Cup. The next paragraph begins with the familiar "Pourquoi je te dis ça, c'est parce que...", an attempt to link these disparate references into a coherent whole. It is as though Kamel's narrative were flipping between different channels and integrating the random information into his story.

Perhaps it is the experience of watching television that leads him to believe that he can consolidate the various contradictory elements of his personality into one unified performance. The televisual structure of Kamel's discourse recalls Raymond Williams's concept of flow. As Williams writes in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, the experience of watching television unifies the diverse units of programming into a continuous whole (84). The fragmentation evoked by listing the various programs that one has seen (a football game interrupted by a detergent commercial, followed by a preview of the evening news) is a misleading way of qualifying how spectators process television. The plurality of content is integrated into a singularity of representation that is not at all jarring or disorienting. This is what allows shows to be interrupted by commercials without the spectator suddenly feeling like the programming has been abruptly cut off. Kamel's mind processes ideas the way that the television presents its programming, jumping from one concept to the next while attempting to maintain coherency. His framework for making sense of the world is televisual.

This televisual style of thinking allows Kamel to weave together disparate experiences such as the history of the Algerian War, cinema, and his own everyday life. What at first appears schizophrenic is indeed a relational way of seeing the links between

seemingly unconnected events. Kamel is able to find the intersection between past and present, simulacra and reality, himself and others, all within a single rambling sentence:

Alors les musulmans va mourir, et c'est ce qu'ils ont fait et un million et demi de morts plus tard ils ont libéré le bled et ils ont pu rentrer en boîte la tête haute comme quoi dans la vie on a rien sans rien, même que mon grand-père il est mort en 1956 dans la bataille d'Alger, ce qui fait que mon père le pauvre il avait quatre ans comme moi quand ma mère elle est morte en glissant la pauvre, sauf que mon grand-père lui il a glissé sous la torture, il y a même un super western spaghetti là-dessus ça s'appelle *La Bataille d'Alger* quand ils l'ont passé sur Arte, avec une BO d'Ennio Morricone où le héros du FLN c'est Ali la Pointe et le gars c'est un ancien caïd comme tous les vrais révolutionnaires et tu les vois dessouder des soldats français à la chaîne au coin des rues, genre Christopher Walken dans *King of New York*, la grande classe. (141)

The *bricolage* present in the above sentence points to the heterogeneity of Kamel's consciousness, absorbed simultaneously in the representation of cinema, the reality of his own family history, and the events of the Algerian War. These disparate sources come to inform one another and influence the way that Kamel understands his own place in the world.

Kamel's narrative is structured like a monologue, but it is what Bakhtin would qualify as dialogical, integrating popular culture, history, personal experience, and literature. Kamel speaks through many voices. Perhaps surprisingly, this encounter between various discourses does not result in schizophrenic confusion of the sort described by Frederic Jameson, whereby signifiers are emptied of meaning (*Postmodernism*) – instead, the encounter between these divergent discourses redefines and recontextualizes their meaning. Entertainment programming on television becomes politicized when set against the colonization of Algeria by the French, and the moral impact of Kamel's family history is illuminated by cinema and popular culture. These distinct elements are made richer, or put into question, by virtue of their juxtaposition

with one another. The integration of these various elements and their reciprocal influence on one another is also what distinguishes *Allah superstar* from a more academic exposition on *beur* youth or the influence of the media; the novel asserts its uniqueness in allowing for diverse discourses to coexist and reflect a hybrid consciousness.

Another way of understanding this juxtaposition of diverse references in Kamel's discourse is to view it as a collage. Kamel is, after all, pulling from various sources to piece together his world-view, and in so doing selects fragments that either complement or oppose one another. In his essay, "The Object of Post-Criticism", Gregory L. Ulmer describes collage as a break in continuity that leads to a "double-reading":

that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition. Thus the art of collage proves to be one of the most effective strategies in the putting into question of all the illusions of representation. (Foster, 88)

According to Ulmer, collage defamiliarizes various elements by opposing them to one another, opening them to critical analysis in a way that would not be possible in their original context. Kamel's intertextual collage simultaneously brings together divergent discourses and sets them apart, both harmonizing them and opposing them in a critical way. One example of this occurs as Kamel is leaving the home of the Sheikh, who is fuming with anger after a failed negotiation to establish a partnership relating to Kamel's standup show. Kamel remarks,

Ses yeux on aurait dit les flammes de l'enfer et je me suis dit ça doit lui chauffer la tête mais le biz c'est le biz et je vois pas pourquoi je vais me laisser impressionner par un imam, moi je suis comme Javier Bardem, c'est un acteur espagnol j'ai lu son interview dans un *Studio* que Sidonie elle a tiré chez Mareva et où Javier Bardem il dit 'moi je crois pas en Dieu, je crois en Al Pacino!' (97)

Kamel brings together formulations he has read in a magazine, cliché phrases like “le biz c’est le biz”, and descriptive euphemisms to contrast his nonchalant attitude with the Sheikh’s ire. While the intertextual collage coheres into a whole, effectively communicating Kamel’s point of view, it also sets the various discourses that Kamel refers to in opposition to one another. The casual phrases he has absorbed from show business reflect his ignorance of the Sheikh’s diabolical influence and Kamel’s own delusions of grandeur – if Kamel were anything like Javier Bardem, he would likely not be reading magazines that a friend stole from work. Yet the power of media discourse encourages Kamel to identify with celebrities and popular catchphrases rather than understanding the dangerous situation he is in. Recontextualizing quotes from Hollywood emphasizes both their power to shape consciousness and their incongruity in the everyday world of someone like Kamel.

Allah superstar thus unfolds through contradictions and juxtapositions. Kamel is an inconsistent character who embodies the conflicting messages he hears from the media and his real world community. His discourse likewise borrows from all sources, bringing together popular quotes, real world events, and allusions to media culture in a way that recontextualizes these elements and puts them into critical relief. By creating a complex character who reflects these contradictions and heterogeneous influences, Y.B. comments not only on the paradoxical situation that Kamel is in as he struggles to negotiate the tension between his ethnic community and his superstar ambition, but also on the sense-making process of an individual who is saturated by media and struggling to adapt the messages of popular culture to his everyday life.

Y.B. employs the novel's dialogical form to express these contradictions, effectively painting a complex consciousness in language and thereby offering the discourses he has absorbed to the reader for examination. *Allah superstar* supposedly transcribes a stand-up act that is performed orally, and transforming Kamel's speech into text on the page enhances the reader's ability to critically analyze the structure and content of his performance. The narrative puts into question the statements affirmed by its unreliable narrator; at the same time, however, these conflicting points of view constitute parts of an individual identity striving for coherency. This double reading is subversive in that it interrogates "the illusions of representation" (to quote Ulmer) and thereby gives the novel the political power to contest dominant narratives found in media.

The Novel in Media Culture

As with many televisual or mediacentric novels, the modern-day French society portrayed in *Allah superstar* prefers media to literature. Bala and Kamel sell classic books to earn money, though the novels they acquire have been found in the garbage bins of the rich and are destined for a small market of specialty bookstores or bridge vendors (146). The quantity of discarded books is impressive, and their absence from the bookshelves of actual readers explains the political ignorance of French society. Kamel describes the assortment of books that have been thrown away: "des montagnes de rayonnages avec des milliers de bouquins qui pourrissent sur pied vu que les Français ils lisent plus, après tu t'étonnes qu'avec leurs pieds ils votent Le Pen devant TF1" (147). According to Kamel, the fact that the French public develops its political consciousness via television rather than books leads to the radical conservatism that attracts voters to

someone like Le Pen. Rather than seeing the multiple sides of an issue, voters absorb the simplified version of politics that scapegoats minorities and immigrants.

The contrast to this ignorant public is Bala, one of Kamel's friends who engages in the book business. Described as a bibliophile, Bala fits the cliché of an intellectual with his serious demeanor, goatee, and glasses (144). He studies history and social movements, and tries to impart his knowledge onto Kamel. In fact, Bala considers Kamel's comedy sketch to be the initial stage of his "complexe du colonisé" and sees through Kamel's naïve attempts to deny the political consequences of his performance (158). By challenging Kamel's simplistic notions, Bala acts as a voice of reason and a foil to Kamel's naïve worldview.

Kamel, on the other hand, struggles with literature, and admits that he knows little about classic books apart from what he may have picked up in school or seen in a movie (148). For him, the value of a book is not in its content but rather its resale value, and he confuses the words "bibliophilie" and "pédophilie", marking book reading as a strange fetish or perversion (149). Kamel's contact with literature is generally mediated by television, and he happens to watch the film adaptation of *Othello* on Arte after hearing that his hero Jamel Debbouze has always wanted to act in it (154). His illiteracy becomes evident in Kamel's difficulty in interpreting signs: after Bala reads him an excerpt from the political activist Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, a passage that illuminates the paternalistic and subtle racism of the French Republic that plagues Kamel's everyday life, Kamel admits that "moi j'ai pas trop capté le sens profond du truc" (158). Much of the humor in *Allah superstar* springs from the fact that Kamel does

not know how to read the situation he is in, whether it be his manipulative relationship with his girlfriend or the fact that he is deeply entrenched in politics without realizing it.

The contrast between Bala and Kamel suggests that it is books, rather than the media, that elucidate the way that the social structure marginalizes certain individuals. The media in *Allah superstar* obscure the connection between French racial history and modern day entertainment, leading Kamel to believe that making fun of Arabs and being laughed at by the public will bring his family some measure of wealth and respect. The political consciousness that allows Bala to view the media critically and to see the colonial exposition as the ancestor of “Loft Story” is a product of his reading, an activity that Kamel seems to take no interest in.

Books are thus portrayed as windows onto a political reality that contemporary media generally avoids. *Allah superstar* is self-referential in this regard, as it presents a marginalized point of view and a controversial interpretation of the causes of modern-day political unrest. Y.B. delivers his own metacommentary on *Allah superstar* within the novel under the guise of an imagined journalist named YB (Yoram Benzona), who writes a critique of Kamel’s sketch: “Ce ‘Stand-up du caméléon’ garde toutefois d’indéniables qualités anxiogènes, en ce sens qu’il est symptomatique du malaise des banlieues, en particulier d’Evry, puisque Kamel Hassani en est le fruit amer, une grenade, en l’occurrence” (201). The novel thus serves to draw the reader’s attention to the racial politics in France by manifesting the consciousness that results from its sociopolitical climate: Kamel is both the fruit, or product, of this society, and a grenade ready to explode with violence.

If, as Beigbeder claims, the purpose of the novel today is to say what other media refuse to or cannot describe, then *Allah superstar* succeeds in bringing forth a highly controversial topic from the standpoint of an underrepresented voice. Kamel stages his terrorist act on the anniversary of September 11th, and thus touches a very real cord for his readers. There has been a great deal of interest in understanding why someone like Kamel – a fully acculturated French citizen – would turn to radical Islamism. And yet the perpetrators of this sort of violence are rarely given a chance to speak, and are instead framed by the discourse of the media (as exemplified by the press blurb describing the bombing at the end of the novel).

We might ask what accounts for this distinction between the media and the novel. Beigbeder points to the commercial support underlying media, and we might assume that there is little profit to be made from presenting ideas that contradict if not attack a mainstream point of view. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the format of news media gives little time to expound on an idea before passing to the next shot, which explains why the media would resort to stereotypes rather than fleshing out a full portrait of an individual. In *Allah superstar*, the reason is more insidious and ideological: the media manifest the racism that runs through French society and the unresolved tension between the Republic and its immigrant population. Political science professor Stephanie Greco Larson argues in her book *Media and Minorities* that the media sustain reigning ideologies because they represent the interests of those in power: “As an establishment institution, news organizations are invested in the status quo; they are either part of a ruling class or protectors of that class” (147). This may well explain why Kamel sees so few Arabs on French television, or why the journalist PPDA (Patrick Poivre d’Arvor, a household name

who is often referred to by his initials) tells a racist joke after hosting Kamel on his news show. In response to an accusation that he has stolen his jokes from other comedians, Kamel responds, “c’est normal vu que tous les Arabes c’est des voleurs, surtout au JT de TF1 si tu vois ce que je veux dire mon frère” (206). The media’s rhetoric pigeonholes Arabs as thieves and delinquents, and this correlates with the racist attitudes of producers and audiences.

Then again, the media’s worldview dates back much further in French history than the widespread use of television. *Allah superstar* points to the colonial experience as the root of the current crisis and qualifies the contemporary French perspective on Arabs as an extension of the dehumanization and alienation of Arabs in the past. Kamel’s response to the media scandal that accompanies his rise in popularity and the subsequent tagging of his local mosque is a lack of surprise: “on est pas en crise, c’est juste que la France elle est en train de reprendre son vrai visage et c’est tout” (204). For Kamel, the French have always been racist toward Arabs, and the recent outpouring of nationalistic fervor is but the manifestation of a sentiment that has been hiding beneath the surface all along.

Allah superstar is an especially timely novel given that the response of French government officials after 9/11 was to target the *banlieues* and their largely immigrant population as the source of uncertainty and insecurity threatening the French nation (Bauman, 55). The 2002 presidential elections catered to the theme of securing France from its enemies, leading the ultra-conservative (and arguably xenophobic) Jean-Marie Le Pen to the second round of voting. The media greatly benefitted from this heightened

sense of vulnerability on the part of the French public and its subsequent consumption of news coverage relating to the domestic unrest lurking in its suburbs.

The novel, with its exploration of subjectivity and lengthy format, is an ideal space to interrogate this Us vs. Them mentality. Where the media see a simple situation played out between opposing camps, the novel sees ambiguity; Y.B. admits to creating a complex character that requires interpretation. On the Grasset website he writes, “Kamel Léon Hassani est entièrement fabriqué pour une cause en ‘isme’, mais de là à te dire laquelle... Je crois qu’au départ il s’agissait du racisme, mais je n’en suis plus très sûr à l’arrivée. C’est le boulot du lecteur et du critique de savoir ce que j’ai voulu dire. Si je le savais moi-même, je serais critique, pas écrivain.” It is this very ambiguity that allows Kamel to express a complexity denied him by the media, and that secures a role for the novel despite an abundance of information in the news.

Conclusion

Allah superstar represents a political engagement on the part of its author that qualifies Y.B. as an intellectual, not in the English sense of the term (someone who contributes to a body of knowledge) but rather in the French sense of defending justice in the public sphere. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who has written on the subject of intellectualism and has become increasingly involved in the current economic and political affairs of his time, describes an incident in his book *Acts of Resistance* whereby a train driver reacted to the bombing of his metro train by warning the public not to turn against the Algerian community whom he described as ‘people like us.’ Bourdieu responded to the train driver’s remark as follows:

That simple remark contained an exhortation by example to combat resolutely all those who, in their desire always to leap to the simplest answer,

caricature an ambiguous historical reality in order to reduce it to the reassuring dichotomies of Manichean thought which television, always inclined to confuse a rational dialogue with a wrestling match, has set up as a model. It is infinitely easier to take up a position for or against an idea, a value, a person, an institution or a situation, than to analyse what it truly is, in all its complexity. People are all the quicker to *take sides* on what journalists call a ‘problem of society’ – the question of the Muslim veil, for example – the more incapable they are of analysing and understanding its meaning, which is often quite contrary to ethnocentric intuition. (22)

Y.B. embodies the figure of the intellectual in his insistence on complicating the dichotomy between “authentic” French citizens and “unassimilable” immigrants, effectively creating ambiguity where there was once a clear line demarcating separation. I have already evoked Y.B.’s own reluctance to frame a thesis for his novel – this is not an authoritarian fiction or a *roman à thèse*; instead, it is a discussion of how the media and the public collaborate to frame Arabs in an unflattering light, and how those expectations affect the current political unrest in France.

In his book *Representation of the Intellectual*, Edward W. Said states, “Least of all should an intellectual be there to make his/her audiences feel good: the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant” (12). *Allah superstar*’s effectiveness is due in no small part to its willingness to put readers on the spot, implicating them in the current political situation and bringing them into the narrative in a way that makes the public personal. We are asked to identify with Kamel’s plight, and then to realize our own participation in bringing about his downfall. The novel delivers its message in a more intimate, and therefore powerful, way than a journalistic exposé. Here we are immersed in Kamel’s words and invited into his subjective world, seeing him as a human rather than an object of study.

The first three novels examined here have taken a position against the media, suggesting that the novel is the site of contestation against a hegemonic media discourse. The next two novels will offer a unique perspective: what if the nefarious effects of television were not merely offensive but actually fascinating? With increasing attention to how television transforms the minds and bodies of spectators, novelists take on a scientific approach to studying characters who undergo exposure to television. Though the ethical stance is still present, the next two novels are primarily driven by curiosity, seeing the contemporary media-centric world as a place where science fiction is being brought to life.

Chapter Four: Amélie Nothomb's *Acide sulfurique*: Reality Television, Critique and Complicity

The novels studied thus far have all taken an ethical position in regards to television, urging their readers to treat television with suspicion and to think critically about its physical, political, and social consequences. French intellectuals, notably Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Pierre Bourdieu, inspire this ethics of suspicion in their treatment of television's ill effects. How does the blurring of reality and representation threaten the viewer's sense of responsibility and engagement in world affairs? In what ways does living virtually rather than experientially alter the interaction with one's environment? How does the representation of minorities in the media define their social status? These questions are not only the purview of intellectuals - the polemic concerning television's impact on individual and societal values also manifests itself in the popular press, including the front pages of national publications such as *Le Monde* and *Libération* (Biltereyst, 96).

In recent years, it is arguably reality television that has attracted the most vociferous reaction by intellectuals and journalists. Reality programming represents the epitome of television: it straddles reality and representation, emphasizes affect over rational discourse, and engages the everyday world while highlighting the spectacular and the sensational. In her book *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy*, Misha Kavka refers to reality programming as the *sine qua non* of television, given that the genre functions by "distilling and heightening that which TV does best – the creation of intimate relations across a screen" (x). For Kavka, reality television brings to the foreground the affective elements that define the medium: intersubjectivity, privacy, and presentism (5). This may well explain the popularity of this genre of programming as well as its denigration

by television's critics – for those who love television, reality programs present an opportunity for the medium to do what it does best; for those who already hold television in disregard, reality programs reflect the worst that it has to offer. Reality shows are cheap to produce and focus on entertainment rather than edification, epitomizing for many the low quality of television programming.

In France, the conversation about reality television has taken a particularly ethical tone. The appearance of *Loft Story* (the French version of *Big Brother*) in 2001 generated a great deal of discussion about the moral implications of this new genre of programming. In his essay, “Reality TV, Troublesome Pictures and Panics: Reappraising the Public Controversy Around Reality TV in Europe”, Daniel Biltereyst qualifies the popularity of *Loft Story* as a “moral panic”: the show threatened core values related to French traditions, culture, and privacy. Intellectuals and media watchdogs engaged in a very public polemic concerning the corruptive influence on viewers (and particularly younger viewers) of what many elite cultural critics considered *la télépoubelle*.

In addition to the outcry concerning the scandalous content of many of these programs, critics have pointed to the danger that reality shows pose for the psychological health of the contestants, many of whom sacrifice their privacy to appear on television and expose themselves to public scrutiny. Accusations that the show was violating the privacy rights of its contestants led the CSA (*Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel*) to change the rules of the game and impose two hours of privacy a day, as well as to modify the procedure for eliminating contestants (Biltereyst, 103). More recently, the CSA has been considering revising the selection process of reality television contestants to protect those who are psychologically fragile and to move the programs to a later time in an

effort to shield minors from vulgar and violent content (Morio). Media watchdogs see reality television as a public threat, both to audiences and the everyday people chosen to participate in the shows.

Despite the recent proliferation of reality shows and their accompanying criticism, the genre (and the alarm it inspires) is hardly new. Long before France adopted its own version of reality television, Jean Baudrillard decried the American “TV verité experiment” of the Loud family (*Simulacra*, 20). The Louds, a middle-class family living in California, were filmed for a documentary that aired on PBS in 1973. Their intimate lives, including the unplanned divorce of parents Bill and Pat, were captured on film and broadcast to the American public, creating the prototype for other reality television shows that document the intimate lives of ordinary people. For Baudrillard, the Louds were the epiphany of a new hyperreal televisual order in which mediation blurred with reality:

Such a blending, such a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium, without the possibility of isolating the effects [...] dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV – indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence. (*Simulacra*, 22)

According to Baudrillard, reality television signaled the arrival of a new aesthetic that confused the distinction between spectacle and spectator. With the banality of a family’s private life elevated to prime time, television had declared its victory over ordinary existence, representing for Baudrillard an insidious and threatening situation.

The controversy surrounding reality television leads one to predict that a novel framed around this sort of programming would be even more “extreme” than *99 francs*, even more politically charged than *Allah superstar*. Reality television easily lends itself to criticism, and the ethical polemic surrounding its influence creates an ideal opportunity

for literature to intervene as a moral guardian, alerting readers to the social harm of this sort of programming. All this makes it surprising to read Amélie Nothomb's 2005 novel *Acide sulfurique* whose story depicts a reality television show but frames its ethical infractions as objects of fascination rather than 'moral panics'. The reader is less alarmed by the show's ethical callousness and more intrigued by the interesting interpersonal dynamics that it creates. Nothomb exaggerates the cruelty of the genre, but the satire created by her novel appeals to the reader's curiosity rather than his or her moral judgment. The spectacle created by the narration puts the reader at a distance from the ethical implications of reality TV, allowing us to observe the events narrated with curious indifference.

For if the initial premise of the novel seems controversial – a group of people selected against their will compete for survival in a concentration camp – the broader social commentary is diverted to a study of the relationship between two characters, Pannonique and Zdena. The shocking context for their encounter becomes little more than a setting for the psychological examination of otherness common to Nothomb's other novels. In fact, the *mise en scène* of reality TV, which at first appears to constitute a critical satire of the genre, evolves over the course of the narrative into an ambiguous commentary on the ethics of the contemporary age. As I will argue in this chapter, Nothomb's satire is compromised by the fact that her own novels feature many of the characteristics and ideologies associated with reality TV. Rather than distinguishing her novel from image media, as the novelists studied thus far have done, Nothomb's novel demonstrates complicity with the reality television genre, placing the reader in a similarly

voyeuristic position and stressing the interpersonal drama between the characters rather than the larger moral questions that *Concentration* raises.

The similarities between Nothomb's writing and reality TV suggest a much different phenomenon occurring in the contemporary French novel than what we have seen to this point. My analysis of *Acide sulfurique* indicates that rather than being a counterpoint to television, the novel now responds to the same cultural trends as television does, whether it be an appetite for voyeurism, indifference to suffering, or the enchantment of spectacle. The fact that *Acide sulfurique* represents a "popular" novel intended to appeal to a mass audience may even intensify the desire of the novelist to cater to audiences conditioned by mass image media and responsive to their ideology.

This hesitation to directly condemn reality TV may well also reflect Nothomb's ambivalent relationship with television, as well as with *la littérature engagée*. While she has criticized the effects of watching television in a short untitled novella (*Sans nom*), Nothomb undoubtedly benefits from frequent exposure in the media and is very much a television celebrity, her unusual hats and quirky habits now readily recognizable thanks to interviews and appearances on talk shows. While her novels explore the dark sides of human nature, Nothomb herself prefers to avoid any particular ideology, including feminism. The irony and hybridity characteristic of her writing make her novels difficult to classify and thus far from the "authoritarian fictions" described by Susan Suleiman. Nothomb's novels do not appear to be pushing any particular message.

How, then does this novel respond to the burgeoning genre of reality television, and why does it choose to target this particular programming in its narrative? What elements of Nothomb's writing make this novel "televisual", albeit in a less critical way

than we've seen in the previous novels we have explored? In this chapter, I will explore Nothomb's fascination with reality television in *Acide sulfurique* and assess how the political and ethical implications of her critique become absorbed by the parallels between her own writing and the qualities of the programming she strives to satirize.

Nothomb's Ambiguous Satire

Acide sulfurique is undeniably a satire of reality television: borrowing from the prevalent objections to the genre, Nothomb's *Concentration* exaggerates the format of shows like *Big Brother* to highlight their unethical treatment of contestants and the callousness of their audience. In *Acide sulfurique*, contestants are selected against their will and subject to physical abuse and starvation, replicating the experience of the death camps as mediatized spectacle. The extreme conditions on *Concentration* exaggerate the premise of shows like *Koh-Lanta* (the French version of *Survivor*), where contestants undergo physical challenges in order to compete for "survival" on the show. The exaggerated abuse of *Concentration*'s contestants parallels the public polemic around reality television, particularly in France, where contestants were seen as victims of spectacle who required legal protection.

Nothomb characterizes the audience that supports this sort of programming as callous and sadistic. As she writes in the opening sentences, "Vint le moment où la souffrance des autres ne leur suffit plus; il leur en fallut le spectacle" (9). *Concentration*'s audience members consume the spectacle of the contestants' suffering and participate directly in the program by regularly selecting an individual for extermination. Many real-life Reality shows feature contestants competing for "survival", and the challenges are construed so as to put participants' physical and

emotional health in a vulnerable position. The pressure of selecting which contestant will continue onto the next round is often intensified with suspenseful pauses and dramatic music, creating severe stress for participants on the public chopping block. The novel thus exaggerates or literalizes the premises of reality television, elucidating for readers the cruelty underlying the widely popular television programs.

Nothomb's expressed motivation for writing the book also indicates a desire to parody the lack of ethics she associates with reality programs. In a 2005 interview on the program *Campus*, the writer recalls her reaction to viewing a reality TV program: "ça m'a mise en colère: si on peut regarder ces émissions au second degré, c'est encore pire car ça veut dire qu'on condescend au mépris de l'humanité, qu'on y prend plaisir [...]" (David, 111). Nothomb is outraged by the casual attitude of the viewing public to what she sees as abuse; according to her, the contestants of reality TV programming are victims whose suffering is considered entertainment.

The premise of *Acide sulfurique*, however, is far more shocking than its execution. Like a reality television program, the novel focuses on the dramatic interactions between its characters at the expense of broader social commentary. What begins as a theater of cruelty becomes the stage for the private relationship between two strangers. The reader's attention is diverted away from the perverse cruelty of *Concentration* and toward the dramatic and secretive dialogue between Pannonique and Zdena. The affective dimension of their relationship overrides the political or social commentary that was initially suggested by the satirical context of the plot.

Moreover, the reader constantly hesitates between seeing the events of the novel as a conversation with the real world and treating them as literary inventions. While

many satirical novels allude to real-world people or events in order to highlight the connection between the real world and the text, *Acide sulfurique* approaches the extra-textual world but immediately retreats into its fictional narrative. There are several scenes where Pannonique looks into the camera and directly addresses the audience of *Concentration*. She yells, “Spectateurs, éteignez vos télévisions! Les pires coupables, c’est vous! Si vous n’accordiez pas une si large audience à cette émission monstrueuse, elle n’existerait plus depuis longtemps!” (109). The accusation is dramatic, and at this point it is possible for the reader to feel as if Pannonique is speaking directly to him or her, delivering the novel’s implicit message: stop supporting the exploitation of others on television. Yet the tension is broken almost immediately once a kapo hits Pannonique and resumes the story, undermining the character’s words and recontextualizing Pannonique’s diatribe as a fictional event rather than a confrontation with the real world.

The novel’s characters and plot have only a tenuous relationship to the extradiegetic world. Pannonique and Zdena are caricatured personages from Nothomb’s imagination rather than representatives from the real world. Zdena is homely and initially selected for *Concentration* based on her lack of moral compass, while Pannonique is the beautiful victim fighting for justice. These are not multifaceted characters with whom the reader is invited to identify, nor are they signifiers for individuals, groups, or ideologies in the reader’s own world. Their opposing traits allow Nothomb to create tension and dialogue within the novel, a strategy reminiscent of the selection of contrasting personalities for reality programs in order to arouse dramatic conflict. The encounter between these two divergent personalities does not signal an

opposition of real-world ideas; Zdena and Pannonique belong to Nothomb's literary space rather than the world outside the novel.

Acide sulfurique creates a uniquely fictional, if not fable-like, aesthetic. Nothomb's dystopia constitutes a surreal world described by an omniscient narrator: "Aucune qualification n'était nécessaire pour être arrêté. Les rafles se produisaient n'importe où: on emportait tout le monde, sans dérogation possible. Être humain était le critère unique" (9). The narrator creates a fictional setting distinct from the real world of the reader. There are no references to contemporary events or individuals that would anchor this literary space in the reader's reality; it is not clear whether the story takes place in the future, the present, or purely the writer's imagination. The language of the novel reinforces the detachment from reality: we are thrown into a literary universe described in the *passé simple* through an omniscient third-person narrator rather than the more colloquial first-person narration of Beigbeder or Y.B.

The events of the novel are likewise self-contained. At the novel's end, Pannonique and Zdena manage to leave the concentration camp and move on with their lives. Unlike the apocalyptic ending of *99 francs*, which failed to resolve the conflict of its narrative, *Acide sulfurique* allows its protagonists to escape the prison in which they find themselves. The result of this resolution is a feeling of satisfaction on the part of the reader rather than a call to action – the two characters have managed to solve the problem on their own, and the tensions within the story have dissipated. The ethical question of whether spectacle renders the public callous to suffering is forgotten, and the reader's attention is focused on the individual characters rather than their social context.

Of course, satire does not necessarily serve a moralizing function, nor does it require the call to action common to *la littérature engagée*. Nonetheless, given Nothomb's original impetus to write the novel and the choice to satirize controversial shows like *Big Brother*, it would seem that the ethical dimension would be explored further. Instead, the novel's function hesitates between a commentary on the reader's own world and a unique nothombian universe. It is not entirely clear whether this narrative holds a mirror to contemporary society, or serves as a fictional escape from the everyday world.

Acide sulfurique, while only ambiguously commenting on the real world, is unmistakably in dialogue with Nothomb's other writing. Readers familiar with Nothomb's oeuvre will certainly see the parallels between this novel as well as her other works: the narrative style, the familiar themes (hunger, the dynamic between the torturer and the victim, etc.), and the eccentric personalities of her characters. The intertextual links between *Acide sulfurique* and Nothomb's other novels put the social commentary implied by this satire into question. Is the premise of this novel driven by Nothomb's outrage at reality television, or is it merely a convenient setting for her familiar style of writing?

Nothomb was certainly not the first to compare reality television formats to a concentration camp – in Germany, the ethos of *Big Brother* was quickly denounced as claustrophobic and complicit with Nazi ideology, and in France the writer Philippe Sollers compared *Loft Story* to a prison camp (Biltreyst, 103) – yet there is something in her particular treatment of this motif that makes it titillating rather than shocking, dramatic rather than horrifying. In fact, in her 2005 book *Amélie Nothomb: l'éternelle*

affamée, Laureline Amanieux characterizes the spaces in Nothomb's novels as evocative of the concentration camp experience: her characters are often removed from their familiar contexts and put into claustrophobic spaces that become threatening: "Après avoir été coupés de leur environnement familial ou social habituel, les héros se trouvent dans un univers carcéral extrême sous l'emprise d'un bourreau totalitaire qui provoque leur destruction mentale ou physique" (157). Amanieux was likely unaware of *Acide sulfurique*, which came out in the same year as her own book, yet she already recognized the concentration camp as a motif in Nothomb's fiction. The use of the concentration camp could therefore be merely a nothombian narrative device; if the structure of reality shows resembles a concentration camp, then that particular setting is ideal for the sort of psychological observation that Nothomb is known for developing in her novels.

The ambiguity of Nothomb's satire, particularly in contrast to the overt televisual critique of the other novels in this study, begs the question of what may be undermining Nothomb's intentions to express her anger at reality TV. What I will argue in the next section is that Nothomb's critique of media, and reality television in particular, is compromised by her implication in the ideology of spectacle, suffering as entertainment, and voyeurism. The structural and stylistic aspects of her writing conform to the characteristics of reality TV. Were she critiquing the callous nature of spectacle, the distracting emphasis on individuals rather than larger social issues in Reality programming, or the voyeuristic impulse that drives the exploitation of Reality contestants' privacy, then her own novel would be incriminated as well.

In fact, Nothomb's novel illustrates, perhaps inadvertently, that the attitudes and ideologies reflected in reality programming also course through popular novels. The

novelist and the television producer cater to the same audience, appealing to the same desires and interests. This is a theme that has emerged throughout the novels studied here: fiction becomes increasingly embroiled in the culture defined by television and image media. There is no such thing as a “media outsider” – the intertextual fabric that encompasses the language we use, our ethical framework, our cognitive mapping, our cultural references, all are connected to a network that is heavily influenced by new media. It is no wonder that Nothomb’s novel encounters difficulty in critiquing media given that both forms of representation are seeped in the same cultural soup.

A Compromised Critique: the links between Nothomb’s fiction and reality television

In her book *Fin de Millénaire: The Aesthetics of Crisis*, Ruth Cruickshank accuses some of the most critically-acclaimed French writers of the past few decades (including Christine Angot, Marie Redonnet, Jean Echenoz, and Michel Houellebecq) of perpetuating the same attraction to crisis in their novels as that so often present in the media: “All of these writers’ representations risk attracting the accusation that they are producing a voyeuristic *jouissance* in readers and taking masochistic pleasure in crisis that parallels the generation, homogenizing, and naturalizing of trauma by the tropes of reality television and the news media” (262). Rather than taking a critical distance from media representation, the authors referred to by Cruickshank replicate the sensationalism of trauma that drives television ratings. Writers reproduce the same techniques employed by image media, grabbing onto what fascinates audiences and exploiting trauma as a driver for their narratives.

Cruickshank points to the pleasure of consuming crisis narratives – indeed, “jouissance” implies a physical pleasure that would normally be associated with erotic

voyeurism rather than the witnessing of traumatic events. In the contemporary age, image media is often thought to provide a titillating window onto the lives of others, and the pleasure of observing people on the screen confers physical excitement, whether it be an illicit program or a much more mundane one. Bill Nichols notes a parallel between the seemingly innocent act of watching others in an ethnographic documentary and the more risqué and questionable consumption of pornography: “Ethnography is a kind of legitimated pornography, a pornography of knowledge, giving us the pleasure of knowing what had seemed incomprehensible” (210). All forms of watching others – and particularly the sort of watching that leaves the observer anonymous, like the viewers of television – are marked by pleasure and desire. Reality television exploits this voyeuristic impulse by putting the private lives of ordinary people on display for the general public, allowing viewers to see what happens behind closed doors. The urge to see and to know is also what drives the popularity of tabloid magazines and the success of “exclusive interviews” with reclusive celebrities.

The epistophilic and scopophilic impulse that defines so much of contemporary media has infected written fiction as well. Surely the popularity and appeal of autofiction is due in no small part to the reader’s desire to know the intimate thoughts and history of its author. Nothomb’s fans, already familiar with her much publicized personal habits (such as drinking strong tea or eating rotten fruit), are a natural audience for her semi-autobiographical fictional works (*La métaphysique des tubes*, *Biographie de la faim*, *Stupeur et tremblements*). These novels offer curious readers an inside glimpse into the life of an eccentric author whose views and behavior are very much in the media spotlight.

Nothomb extends this voyeuristic appeal to her purely fictional works as well. She is known for emphasizing confession and the divulging of secrets – in her 1992 novel *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Nothomb portrays the confession of a dying novelist who discloses his dark past to a journalist. Like the journalist, the reader also participates in the thrill of getting the “scoop” from a man whose life was formerly cloaked in secrecy. The entire novel could be seen as a confession, narrated almost exclusively through the dialogue between the writer and his interviewer.

In *Acide sulfurique*, the secrets and confessions are generated by the illicit interaction between Zdena and Pannonique. Pannonique is exceptionally protective of her name, and disclosing this information to Zdena constitutes a climax in the narrative. Like the confession in *Hygiène de l'assassin*, the conversations between Zdena and Pannonique are largely presented through the uninterrupted dialogue of the two characters, and many of their exchanges are driven by hidden motives and concealed from the show's other actors. Nothomb caters to the attraction to intimacy, highlighting the secretive character of the two women's conversations. After Pannonique first speaks to Zdena, the narrator remarks, “Aucun média ne saisit la véritable nature de ce qui s'était passé: l'action n'avait eu lieu qu'entre ces deux filles et n'avait de sens que pour elles” (42). The interest in their exchange is due to its private nature; much like the interpersonal dynamics exposed on reality television, what draws us in is the opportunity to witness something that is normally kept a secret.

In addition to exploiting the intimacy between the characters, *Acide sulfurique* parallels reality television in its emphasis on otherness. Nothomb's characters are not people to whom the spectator relates but rather ethnographically observed ‘others’ whose

particularity is highlighted by the narration. The description of Lenka illustrates the attraction of these unusual characters for both viewers of *Concentration* and readers of Nothomb's fiction:

Il y avait même un phénomène, la kapo Lenka, une vamp pulpeuse qui cherchait perpétuellement à plaire. Il ne lui suffisait pas d'aguicher le public et d'onduler des hanches devant les autres kapos: elle allait jusqu'à tenter de séduire les prisonniers, jetant son décolleté à leur figure et décochant des oeillades à ceux qu'elle soumettait. Cette nymphomanie jointe à l'atmosphère méphitique qui sévissait dans l'émission écoeurait autant qu'elle fascinait (27).

The mix of disgust and fascination accurately describes the aesthetic of Nothomb's novels as well as the desired effect that she attributes to Reality programming. The reader and the viewer are intrigued by individuals who are unusual, and in many cases somewhat repugnant. The contestants of Reality programming, like the characters in Nothomb's fiction, are portrayed as oddities, people who attract our interest because they are foreign to our own way of life and exhibit behavior that deviates from the norm.

There is a distinct observational stance that enhances the emphasis on otherness. Creating distance between the observer and his or her object of interest encourages what Nichols refers to as "the fishbowl effect", a dynamic that alienates the observer and shelters him or her from the awkwardness of studying an Other up close. As Nichols explains regarding documentary film, "The fishbowl effect allows us to experience the thrill of strangeness and the apprehension of an Other while also providing the distance from the Other that assures safety" (223).

Nothomb's novels create this fishbowl effect by relating the actions and words of their characters in a seemingly unmediated way, much like the mechanical recording of a video camera. The omniscient narrator acts as an objective witness to the story, communicating the events with short sentences and a pared-down lexicon. This detached

narration, coupled with the unusual setting in which the characters are enclosed, evokes a scientist describing the experiment unfolding in his or her literary petri dish, an analogy that could also be applied to the social experimentation of early reality television. As Misha Kavka explains regarding the origins of Reality programs,

Big Brother was marketed not only as a social experiment, but one based on laboratory-like isolation within a back-to-basics environment – replete, in the first series, with vegetable gardens (season permitting) and chicken coops. [...] a connection based in the ‘truth’ promised by both romantic naturalism and scientific monitoring. At the crossroads between natural habitat and the made-for-TV laboratory, viewers were positioned as fellow scientists, eager to learn what happens to ‘humanity’ when people are caged together for a long period of time in the controlled conditions of a Biosphere-like space. (83)

Concentration offers a similar opportunity to observe a group of “caged” individuals and their dramatic encounters. The narration mimics the observational stance of reality television, encouraging readers to study the characters in their experimental environment.

Concealing and revealing aspects of the characters’ personality, *Acide sulfurique* also plays on the reader’s desire to know who these individuals “really” are. Zdena and Pannonique’s past is never entirely revealed, leaving the reader to construct their opaque personalities from the bits and pieces disclosed over the course of the show. Pannonique’s studies in paleontology hint at the work required of the reader: attempting to understand people given limited information. The titillating nature of epistophilia is underlined by Zdena’s burning urge to know Pannonique, and Pannonique’s erroneous judgment of Zdena’s personality. Pannonique, Zdena, and the reader are all bound by the desire to understand the Other – their difficulty in achieving this aim only heightens their interest.

However, enhancing the strangeness of these characters also sabotages their ability to act as representatives of a greater group, cause, or idea. The selection of odd

and unusual individuals for Reality programming enhances its status as entertainment: the viewer cannot generalize any lessons or principles from the behavior of characters whose lives seem isolated and distinct. As Jon Dovey argues in *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, reality television creates “spectacles of particularity” that feature stories rather than arguments about the world. At the heart of reality television, or docu-soaps, as Dovey refers to them, is an interest in the subjective experience of individuals who are not representative of any larger group. The interest of watching them arises from their uniqueness, and what occurs on these programs has little relevance as social commentary. As Dovey writes, “the docu-soap is inert as a public form” (151).

The “spectacle of particularity” may well be what aborts the social commentary in Nothomb’s satire. The oddity of the characters, the detached stance of the narrator, and the voyeuristic emphasis on the relationship between Zdena and Pannonique undermine any broader message intended by the novel. In a sense, it is the mediation of the story – its narrative style – that prevents readers from seeing this novel as a distorted mirror of their own reality. Unlike novels like *99 francs* that portray a fictionalized version of our own world, *Acide sulfurique* presents an alternate literary universe with little resemblance to the reader’s reality.

The spectacular narration in *Acide sulfurique* thus focuses the reader’s attention on the events in the novel rather than their meaning. We are left on the surface of the narrative, absorbing what is happening but discouraged by the novel’s alienating effects from identifying with the characters or seeing our own connection to the story. Nothomb recognizes the numbing effect of spectacle, and acknowledges it in her story. Pannonique’s accusation that the viewers of *Concentration* are supporting the unethical

practices of the death camp turns into a media event, landing her words on the front pages of the newspapers and, to her disappointment, only increasing the show's popularity (121). The audience of *Concentration* is not only immune to her protestations but perversely inspired to continue watching by her dramatic outcry, indicating that they see her as an Other whose experience evokes little empathy or care.

The failure of Pannonique's attempt to be taken seriously by her audience calls into question the ability of media – and fiction – to effect change in the real world. If television transforms real people into images and alienates them from their viewers, then mediation prevents them from having any sort of impact or influence on their audience. And in a social context conditioned by callous detachment from others, the novel is in a far weaker position to engage its readers in any other way than through entertainment.

The Ethics of Spectacle

I began this analysis of *Acide sulfurique* by arguing that the novel's attempt at satire of reality TV was weakened by Nothomb's implication in the culture of spectacle. Rather than being convinced of any particular view relating to reality TV, I was alerted to the ways that Nothomb's own writing corresponds to the structure and style characteristic of that televisual genre. And yet the use of satire in *Acide sulfurique* merits further attention, as the compromised status of her critique indicates new ethical territory for the novel.

Satire has had a noticeable presence in recent novels commenting on postmodern culture. Exaggerating the materialism, commercialism, and individualism of contemporary life allows writers to highlight ideologies that they feel have undermined traditional or social values. In his book *Ethics and Desire in the Wake of Postmodernism*,

Graham Matthews studies the work of several contemporary novelists (including Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, and Michel Houellebecq) to argue for the efficacy of satire in addressing ethical questions in the postmodern age. Whether it be fear, feminism, or politics, each of the writers in Matthews' book uses satire as a means to call into question a particular ideology that concerns contemporary society, both within and outside the novel's world.

The ideology that Nothomb presumably set out to critique was the ethical indifference of spectacle. The viewing public in the novel fails to stop the extermination in the death camps because it is alienated from the characters on the screen. The prisoners are transformed into images, and this allows the audience to witness the spectacle without feeling any personal responsibility for the event. The episode of *Concentration* featuring the extermination of Pannonique attains a record high viewership – 100 percent of the population – and everyone watching has some excuse that averts their sense of culpability in supporting the show (175-177). The narrator describes the hypocrisy of overtly opposing abuse yet being attracted to its spectacle.

Nothomb's novel enacts a broader moral panic surrounding the effect of mediatization on ethics. By mistaking reality for representation, viewers become disconnected from the real events portrayed on their television screens. Pannonique's attempt to stir her audience to action ignores the great divide between her position as an image on the screen and the viewer sitting at home. Television programming is a closed circuit whose ability to catalyze audiences to action is limited. The words of the prisoners on *Concentration* can thus only be self-referential – the show's contestants can only speak to what the viewers see as a representation.

Jean Baudrillard evoked a similar concern for the alienating effects of watching real events on television. He describes the Gulf War as degenerating into pure hyperreal spectacle, the news outlets competing for media viewership and offering coverage of the events as constant televisual entertainment. The mediation of this real event led Baudrillard to proclaim in a series of articles published in the newspaper *Libération* that “the Gulf War did not take place.” For consumers of media, the Gulf War was a mere mediatic event that occurred on the pages of the newspaper or the screens of their television. The link between the signifier and its referent was severed by mediation.

Moreover, an argument could be made that television, and reality TV in particular, encourages a sadistic attitude in the viewing public. Viewers are drawn not to happy stories about functional families but rather the outrageous and dramatic antics of individuals who are often publicly humiliated on screen. Umberto Eco, in his essay “A Guide to the Neo-Television of the 1980s”, even points out that reality TV encourages masochism in the viewer who is caught unawares by the camera and has to pretend to enjoy being exposed: “Men and women (that the camera has, in fact, already maliciously picked out on account of some physical defect or over-pronounced feature) laugh happily at feeling themselves exposed in front of millions of viewers” (252). There is a certain cruelty in putting ordinary people on the screen, and reality TV could well be propagating the pleasure of watching and participating in its display.

Nothomb thus engages in a public conversation about the ethical effects of spectacle. And yet, as I’ve argued in the preceding sections, the critique that she ostensibly seeks to deliver does not develop into a full opposition to the voyeuristic and sadistic impulses encouraged by reality TV. The notion of audience participation in the

culture of spectacle is one that was addressed in *99 francs* and *Allah superstar*: these two novels inspire a feeling of personal involvement in the culture of image media, interpolating the reader and employing symbolic and subjective violence to render the power and message of media positively abject. The reader of *Acide sulfurique*, on the other hand, would likely admit that the situation in the novel is immoral, but that the way it is presented attracts interest and curiosity rather than a questioning of one's own moral responsibility. If Nothomb did indeed intend for her readers to feel revulsion toward *Concentration* and the callous devotion to the show by its audience, then the effect of her novel is quite the opposite: rather than objecting to the fictional program, the reader is drawn into an alienated, detached stance that attracts his or her curiosity to the show. Watching the show unfold, we the reader, much like the audience of *Concentration*, are intrigued by a world that seems divorced from our own and which features the drama of characters that we see as Others.

The observational stance created by the narrative, in which we study the characters like elements in a petri dish, is a hallmark of Nothomb's style. In her essay, "Amélie Nothomb's Dialectic of the Sublime and the Grotesque", Martine Guyot-Bender describes the reader's detachment from Nothomb's narrative: "We are the passers-by who stop to watch an accident along the road, morbidly fascinated by what we see, but able to leave the scene, curious but untouched" (129). Guyot-Bender attributes this distancing to Nothomb's very public and eccentric persona as well as the style of her novels, which she describes as "unemotional, unsentimental, and unengaged".

Anna Kemp notes a similar moral indifference in Nothomb's novels. In her essay, "Amélie the Aesthete", she argues that Nothomb's "decadent aesthetics"

undermines her ability to convey a political or social message. Nothomb is indifferent to politics or morality and chooses instead to focus on beauty, much like the decadent writers of the *fin-de-siècle* for whom writing was “first and foremost a means of transforming or escaping ‘real life’ in order to accede to a superior plane of being characterised by an intensity of aesthetic experience” (238). In contrast to the realist or naturalist writers who aspired to mobilize political reform or expose the true nature of society, Nothomb writes to engage the reader in a surreal, imaginative world where aesthetics trump moral consideration. Kemp writes, “what seems to matter most in Nothomb’s work is not what is good or what is true but what is beautiful and, in line with decadent aesthetics, beauty appears as an ideal with no social or moral purpose” (237). In this line of reasoning, *Acide sulfurique* is an imaginative escape from the real world rather than a reflection of it.

Nothomb’s novels thus mimic the effects that Nothomb attempts to criticize in reality TV: the narration anesthetizes the reader’s ethical sensibility, alienating him or her from the characters and leading him or her to observe the story without feeling personally engaged in the events. Both novel and television live in a world where ethics is mediated by spectacle. This framework complicates the ability of mediums of representation – including the novel – to change the world by influencing their audience. If their message is inherently self-referential because it fails to penetrate the detached stance of the audience, then how do books, films, and television shows extend beyond their framework in order to change the real world?

Acide sulfurique suggests that a message sent via literature will remain between the covers, destined for consumption as a literary spectacle but at a distance from reality.

Literature, like the media, fails to penetrate the real world of its audience. This phenomenon afflicts even the most reality-based media: in his book on documentaries, *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols argues that even reality-based film (documentaries in particular) encourage the consumption of spectacle rather than engaging the reality that they portray:

The aesthetic of epistophilia, like that of scopophilia, nourishes itself, not its own alternative or replacement. We come to value and look forward to the pleasure of engaging the world at a distance, looking out through the windows of our theaters and living rooms onto a world that truly remains “out there,” with all the assurance this provides about the importance of our engagement with a historical world that we have simultaneously postponed in order to attend to a representation of it. (180)

Spectacle promotes representation over direct experience; portraying the real world through media transforms it into an image, giving the public an object for consumption rather than inspiring direct involvement in the situation represented.

Nothomb's novel does not claim to escape from this paradigm or to assume that *la littérature engagée* will succeed in reaching its readers where the screen has failed. Whereas *99 francs* and *Allah superstar* attempted to reach beyond their literary frameworks and into the reality of their readers, *Acide sulfurique* is a self-enclosed literary experiment. Rather than attempting to change the world, the purpose of Nothomb's novels is to provide an escape, an imaginary refuge from the real world. In commenting on the role of literature in Nothomb's autobiographic novels, Amanieux notes, “les livres [...] lui donnent accès à une autre réalité, qui progressivement se superpose à la sienne” (110). Reading, for Nothomb, encourages substituting representation for reality. This may well explain the fantastic nature of her narratives and their unusual characters; the goal is not to bring the reader back to his or her world, but to

create a separate imaginary space to which he or she can flee. When the novel does broach a challenging ethical subject, it does so in an isolated way, confining the subject to its pages rather than reaching out toward the greater world.

If there is indeed an ethical stance in Nothomb's novels, it is one that corresponds closely with the individualism of contemporary media. Individualism is at the heart of Nothomb's eccentric characters, her focus on dialogue and the clash of opposing personalities, and the transition in *Acide sulfurique* from a general satire of reality television to a story of two particular characters, Pannonique and Zdena. In the final pages of the novel, Pietro Livi, another escaped prisoner, acknowledges Pannonique's role in transforming Zdena's character: "c'est à vous que revient le mérite de ce qui s'est passé: vous et vous seule étiez capable de retourner cet être" (191). Pannonique is recognized for her unique heroism, and she in turn learns to appreciate the particular merits of other individuals: "chaque fois que je rencontre une nouvelle personne, je lui demande son nom et je répète ce nom à haute voix" (192). The name, a marker of individuality, is elevated to a new importance.

This embrace of individualism is overtly present in the media, and reality television in particular. The attention devoted to the subjective feelings and identities of Nothomb's characters points to what media theorist Jon Dovey, borrowing from Foucault, refers to as

a 'new regime of truth' based upon the foregrounding of individual subjective experience at the expense of more general truth claims. Changes in TV form toward the subjective rather than the objective, toward reflexivity rather than transparency, and toward a 'theatre of intimacy', reflect not only the political economy of global mass media but also important developments in the relationship between identity and culture. (25)

Nothomb's novel reflects the shift toward a more individualistic, subjective aesthetic, one that is arguably driven by media and reality TV in particular.

What is lost in this focus on individualism is a concrete ethical standard, what many critics of popular culture see as a disintegration of the social fabric in favor of a narcissistic absorption in one's own universe. In his book *Acts of Resistance*, Pierre Bourdieu laments the way that the promotion of individualism has undermined social values:

[...] the 'return of individualism', a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy which tends to destroy the philosophical foundations of the welfare state and in particular the notion of collective responsibility (toward industrial accidents, sickness or poverty) which has been a fundamental achievement of social (and sociological) thought. (7)

Collective responsibility is exactly what has been lost in *Acide sulfurique*, where the audience of *Concentration* fails to see its own connection to the events of the show. Yet what Nothomb suggests as a response is a further retreat into individualism, or at least a focus on one's immediate interests rather than broader social issues. In acting to free the prisoners of *Concentration*, Zdena appears motivated solely by her attraction to an individual rather than the greater question of justice and ethics. Although the prisoners of the show are liberated in the end, the general indifference of telespectators to the suffering they support with their viewership is unchanged. This deeper societal problem is unresolved, and perhaps the narrative suggests that we can only accept things the way they are and focus instead on the individual relationships we encounter in real life. As for the broader ethical problems, we can only bear witness to the events, alienated and amused by the spectacle.

Conclusion

Nothomb's complicity with the culture of reality television gives rise to further questions concerning the critical capacity of literature in a social context conditioned by image media. What *Acide sulfurique* underscores is that reality television programming is determined by audiences whose thirst for spectacle encourages shows like *Concentration*. For writers of popular fiction like Nothomb, does not the same premise hold true? Do her books not also cater to the individualistic, voyeuristic, and sadistic impulses of contemporary audiences?

As David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue in their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, the introduction of a new medium leads the older media to borrow from it and incorporate it into their structure. Bolter and Grusin write, "Television can and does refashion itself to resemble the World Wide Web, and film can and does incorporate and attempt to contain computer graphics within its own linear form. No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning" (55). The novel is likewise not immune to the changing tastes and frameworks of new media, and despite the attempts of some authors (notably Jean-Philippe Toussaint) to isolate the novel from television, the desire to speak to television's mass audiences means that the novel may need to adapt some of its defining traits. The fact that Nothomb's novels are considered "popular fiction" stresses their appeal to mainstream audiences and explains the similarities between her writing and the reality TV genre.

The compromised position of Nothomb's satire makes this a more ambiguous, but also more interesting, novel. The dogmatic voice of someone like Octave, the narrator in

99 francs, is missing from her narration, eliminating the straightforward and authoritarian message from the story, but also opening a space for a more subtle discussion of spectacle and ethics. Nothomb's narrator does not speak with the self-assurance of a moral watchdog; the outrage expressed through Kamel or even the passive frustration of *La Télévision*'s protagonist does not guide the reader toward a clear moral vision. Instead, the narrative presents social problems that seem to have no certain solution, and the novel is embroiled in the same culture as the media it attempts to critique.

The next chapter further explores the novel's fascination with the televisual medium, and particularly its use of information to alter the bodies and psyches of spectators. Chloé Delaume's autofictional novel *J'habite dans la télévision* investigates the way that television infiltrates subjectivity, resulting in a novel that is no longer "compromised" but fully immersed in the media network. Delaume embraces the potential of new media to generate new ways of writing, thinking, and being. Her work incorporates textual practices characteristic of the hypertext and the database, bringing us away from the image and into the realm of digital information.

Chapter Five: Chloé Delaume's *J'habite dans la télévision*: The Novel Confronts the Information Age

The novels discussed thus far have been primarily concerned with image media, namely television and advertising: its rate of processing, its manipulation of consumers, its representation of minorities, the ethics of spectacle. Historically, it is image media that played a predominant role in the French mediascape from the second half of the twentieth century until the early 2000s. The Internet was not adopted with the same speed as it was in the United States (possibly due to the competition with the French Internet precursor, the Minitel), which means that until recently it was television that occupied the great bulk of “screen time”.

A change occurred once the Internet became a household staple. Computer technology has changed the conversation about new media, shifting the interest away from images to information and replacing *la société de spectacle* with the Information Age. The image has become but another item of data: whereas Roland Barthes talked about advertising in terms of myths in 1957 (*Mythologies*), today the discussion would likely involve markets and neurological research. The paradigm of the computer network has permeated our understanding of nature, language, and even the cells in our bodies. Human beings themselves have become elements in the database: our thoughts and actions can be explained by scientific processes and perhaps even determined by algorithms. Our electronic selves – the identities we create through Facebook, the shopping habits we track online, the archive of our search history – can be turned into statistical data and used to sell us products or even incriminate us.

I do not wish to suddenly abandon television and redirect the conversation about new media to an altogether different medium. Instead, I want to point out that television

itself has been redefined in terms of information, both in the way that it functions and in the way that spectators perceive it. Television has evolved dramatically over the past decade and adopted some of the technological advances present in other media. In their book *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin demonstrate the convergence of television and Internet technologies, particularly in the desire of television news to keep up with the abundance of information available via the web:

Because news programs aim to provide viewers with as much information as possible in the shortest possible time, they tend to fill up the screen with visible evidence of the power of television to gather events. This leads to what we might call the “CNN look,” in which the televised image of the newscaster is coordinated with a series of graphics and explanatory captions, until the broadcast begins to resemble a web site or multimedia application. (189)

Television is borrowing from the Internet and adapting to the Information Age. The ability of new media to cater to niche groups and individuals (using the customizable home screen on a computer or web site, for instance) has manifested itself in the proliferation of cable channels. The growing desire for interactivity and the spread of cell phones and Internet have created the ability for viewers to vote contestants off a show by sending text messages, as well as online communities devoted to particular programs. Television has become a much different medium than it was before the Internet.

Likewise, viewers are aware that television is increasingly an information-driven medium, one that responds to market demand and exerts its influence based on research and viewer feedback. This includes overt forms of communication between viewers and programs, such as call-ins to talk shows, as well as more insidious transfers of data of which the viewer may be entirely unaware. As Joyce Nelson explains in *The Perfect Machine: Television and the Bomb*, television advertising in particular uses neurological research to create commercials that are memorable and function below the threshold of

awareness, impacting the unconscious needs and desires of its viewers (74-75). She defines television as a medium that traverses the limits of the physical body in delivering its information: “television bypasses personal boundaries, especially the boundaries of self/screen, conscious/unconscious, and even technology/body in the sense that the nervous system responds to the electronic scanning process” (129). The power of the television to penetrate its viewers' consciousness and determine their behavior suggests that it not only conveys information but also absorbs the viewer into its network. Our shopping choices, the language we use, the values we hold, all are conditioned by televisual information. As Nelson points out, the alarming aspect of this is just how little control we have over this influence – while the television industry invests in neurological research to figure out how to manipulate its viewers, the public is to a large extent unaware that it is ceding authority over its thoughts and behavior. A particular food craving may be the result of ingenious product placement in a favorite show; as we reach for the bag of chips, we may be putting into action the data that was transmitted via the screen.

Chloé Delaume's 2006 autofictional novel *J'habite dans la télévision* addresses this information-dense social structure through its investigation of how the television transforms the subjectivity of its narrator. Delaume asks whether it is possible to maintain one's autonomy vis-à-vis televisual messages, or whether we are in fact elements in a network that passively obey the signals we receive. Delaume's interest in how the television is influencing her actions and thoughts leads her to embark on a twenty-two month-long experiment in which she does nothing but watch television and record her physical and mental changes. It is important to note that Delaume treats

television like an information network – she is intrigued by the way that it alters her thoughts and behaviors, particularly in the unconscious way that Nelson describes in *The Perfect Machine*. This is not a televisual novel focused on spectacle; it interrogates the way that we are transformed by the data coming through the screen and how information factors into televisual programming.

J'habite is a particularly interesting work in that information structures it both thematically and formally; Delaume incorporates elements of the database in order to represent the way that data permeates human subjectivity. The reading experience is akin to accessing files in the archives of Delaume's mind and navigating through cited documents, personal memories, advertising copy, and historical chronicles. Delaume's depersonalized, scientific language also suggests that she is seeing her own self with the same objective distance with which the television defines her as a subject.

Historically, this is a novel that reflects an entirely new way of conceptualizing the self, writing, and technology. Though this work, like the others analyzed in this study, also addresses television, it does so through the lens of a digital, information-based culture. *J'habite* challenges the novel to confront identities that are pliable rather than fixed, to rethink the logic by which it organizes its narrative, and to stretch its generic conventions to accommodate new ways of thinking and being. Delaume's work asks several important questions with regard to the networked self and the novel's ability to represent digital subjectivity: what is the status of narrative in a cultural context where data and information are of primary importance? How does the post-Cartesian subject write the self through autobiographical texts? How can intertextuality reflect the

assembled nature of identity? How can literature both adapt to and challenge reading practices in the digital age?

In contrast to Toussaint's desire to resist televisual influence or Beigbeder's call for literature to do what image media cannot, Delaume's novels embrace the creative potential unleashed by new media forms. Delaume has forged a reputation for blending text and media, having transformed herself into an avatar for the videogame Sims that readers could download from her website and taking inspiration for her writing from popular television programs such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Delaume's personal website includes a blog, links to her musical performances and other texts, and a page announcing her public appearances – the web provides a space for engagement, performance, and play rather than a force to resist or counter. *J'habite* was originally published along with twelve performance pieces accessible via Chloé Delaume's website, including musical performances, scenes from the movie *Videodrome*, and excerpts of televisual flow. The book was conceived as a mixed media project, one that engaged the reader's participation in jumping from the pages of the book to an online site. Her novels adapt to the cognitive and structural changes introduced by new media, blending digital forms and non-narrative frameworks into the literary text.

Delaume's embrace of new media and her willingness to experiment with the text encourages an attitude toward media transformations that we have not seen thus far: what if the changes occurring as a result of new media were primarily interesting rather than threatening? Despite the paranoid conclusions of the novel that the television is infiltrating consciousness and determining subjectivity, Delaume demonstrates a keen interest in the capacity of new media to alter selfhood. The virtual self expands on the

forms and experiences available to material bodies, opening avenues of transformation that are exciting and fascinating. Delaume's enthusiasm for media innovation is evident in her willingness to integrate new structures into her writing, as well as her inclination to immerse herself in the informational network of the television. *J'habite* manifests both the paranoid fear that information is infiltrating subjectivity and the excitement that it offers new possibilities for textual play.

Problematizing Narrative

There is a common perception among literary and media theorists that the Information Age has undermined the status of narrative, ushering in a profound epistemological change whereby the database has become the preferred means of storing and transmitting information. Narrative, in this instance, is tied to a particular historical period whose time has waned. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich writes, "After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – the database" (218). Manovich contrasts the thematic and formal development of the narrative with the unfinished nature of a database, where each element carries equal weight and it is possible to add content without changing the sense of the whole. Essentially, narrative tells a story, while a database presents a collection of individual items. The ever-changing nature of the web, where items are constantly being added or deleted, favors the database as its paradigm.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether narrative will ever be thoroughly relegated to the past, or whether it will always be a necessary tool in making sense of data. No matter what the field – economics, business, computer science, medicine – raw

data will always necessarily be transcribed into a story in order for the numbers to be communicated meaningfully or even understood. It may be more realistic to see the two forms as co-existing or even working together. In *How We Think*, N. Katherine Hayles describes narrative and database as “natural symbionts” (176). She writes, “Because database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful. Narrative, for its part, needs database in the computationally intensive culture of the new millennium to enhance its cultural authority and test the generality of its insights.” The database, according to Hayles, is not displacing narrative but rather redefining its function as a correlate to data.

Hayles makes a controversial claim in favor of integrating data into narrative. If we accept the premise that narrative is indeed in an embattled state, then it would be sensible to adapt it to the information-saturated cultural context by supporting stories with factual evidence. In a world in which information is necessary in order for a claim to be legitimate, one cannot expect a narrative form like the novel to be taken seriously without data to support its arguments. To borrow the language of Lyotard’s seminal work *The Postmodern Condition*, the rules of narrative as a language game would need to be changed in order to adapt them to scientific discourse. Novels would essentially become hybrid essays, referencing statistics and economic figures like Frédéric Beigbeder does in *99 francs*. The advantages of this sort of factual evidence are that the novel becomes more relevant to the real world of the reader while its claims become more convincing.

One might wonder, however, what will happen to narratives that are data-free, and fictional narratives in particular. Will it still be worthwhile to read novels that tell

stories that are purely imagined? Will the aesthetic dimension of writing become secondary to the strength of its argument, essentially emphasizing the message over the form? Once data is accepted as a necessary part of making a claim, the fictional story becomes irrelevant as a means of making sense of one's personal experience or the greater world. As Michel Houellebecq cynically comments in *Interventions 2*,

Le XXe siècle restera l'âge du triomphe dans l'esprit du grand public d'une explication scientifique du monde, associée par lui à une ontologie matérialiste et au principe de déterminisme local. La construction romanesque d'un personnage romanesque devra donc, s'il est honnête, lui apparaître comme un exercice un peu formel et vain ; somme toute, une fiche technique serait bien suffisante. (152)

According to Houellebecq, the absence of scientific or technical support for the novelist's worldview allows it to be easily dismissed in the eyes of a reader conditioned to a much more materialistic explanation of human experience. For the contemporary reader seeking to learn more about life, a scientific, objective study holds more weight than a fictional work.

J'habite demonstrates this tension between narrative and database in both its form and content. While the novel essentially tells the story of Delaume's televisual experiment, it does so in a fragmented form where the narrative voice is interspersed with cited documents, excerpts from Delaume's research, flashback memories, and historical chronicles. The paragraphs are separated by several lines of empty space to indicate the lack of continuity from one fragment to the next. *Pièce 3/27*, for instance, alternates between the subjective voice of Chloé Delaume describing the narrator's thoughts and desires and the more objective description of the prefrontal cortex in the brain, neuroscientific research by industries such as Coca Cola, the historical memory of testing done on unwilling subjects during the Holocaust, quotes from an expert in economics,

and Delaume's memories of selecting one product over another during a market research study in 1989 or 1990. The story is told through a collage form where various types of discourse originating from a plethora of sources intersect. This is not unlike the structure of a database or an archive where a search produces a series of items that are topically rather than sequentially linked. The form of the database thus breaks into the narrative, producing a hybrid form whereby the story is told through a series of thematically related items.

The theme of information is of central importance to this database structure. The intertextual references are often cited as evidence of Delaume's claims, linking her personal experience to greater events occurring in the extradiegetic world. The information is often historical or scientific in nature, delivered through an objective tone reminiscent of a formal academic document rather than the free form of fictional narrative. Much of her referencing relies on authoritative sources whose legitimacy is not questioned or undermined – the documents are presented like facts. *Pièce 8/27*, for instance, is composed of a series of citations whose authors are cited much as they would be in a research paper. Delaume does not comment on or interpret these documents other than presenting them on the page; they are raw evidence that supports and expands on her individual experience.

The novel takes on a documentary form in which the reader is aware that the author is communicating information about the real world. The novel's legitimacy as a source of information is redefined according to scientific rules: the reader accepts Delaume's argument because it is supported by research and evidence. Delaume's personal experience is even communicated in a scientific, formal manner that alludes to

the format and language of a research document. Her behavior is explained in terms of chemistry and biology: in a ten-point summary of her response to commercial messages she writes, “Deux fois par jour, je regarde la télévision pendant que mon organisme produit de la ghreline” (74). Delaume is clearly integrating a scientific logic into her narrative in both her use of intertextual citations and her own writing style.

Information is present not only in the rules of the scientific language game that legitimates Delaume’s narrative, but also in the link between the various items in *J’habite*’s intertextual web. As Gregory Ulmer describes in his essay “Grammatology (in the Stacks) of Hypermedia”, the electronic way of organizing information, which Ulmer terms “pattern”, works through an associative rather than a temporal or causal logic. Unlike narrative, which reasons abductively and sequentially, pattern reasons conductively (161). Ulmer likens pattern to the logic present in the study of dreams in psychoanalysis. We can see these two logics at play in *J’habite* in the interaction between the diachronic development of Delaume’s experiment and the “patterned” logic of her cited documents. Though the documents disrupt the temporal development of the story and the coherence of the writing voice, this interruption is mediated by the fact that the references thematically link together. *Pièce 2/27*, for instance, consists of a scientific description of a procedure whereby a substance is injected into the lymphatic system. The citation from a surgeon at the Curie Institute appears at first to be a non-sequitur: it occupies its own *pièce* and intervenes in the narrator’s introduction. However, the reference is drawn into the tissue of the text once Doctor Nos describes the first ganglions to be affected by the procedure as “ganglions sentinelles” (25), echoing Delaume’s reference to herself as “la sentinelle”. This associative link brings the scientific

description into dialogue with Delaume's conception of herself as a watchdog and test subject.

The novel is truly a hybrid between these two different ways of organizing information. *J'habite* blends narrative and database logic, essentially telling two stories: one the progression of Delaume's experiment, the other the fluidity between her own narrative and the information network. The structure of the novel functions as a *mise en abyme* of the way that our autonomous, "narrative" selves are in fact permeated by external information. Delaume's identity reflects the influence of these diverse streams of information in addition to the personal narrative "story".

What the novel suggests is that a purely narrative representation of subjectivity fails to account for the ways in which the post-Cartesian subject communicates with networks of information. Rather than opposing narrative and database, Delaume's work integrates them together in an effort to more accurately reflect the assembled nature of subjectivity in the Information Age. While narrative may not be entirely outdated (*J'habite* does, after all, tell the story of Delaume's transformation), its form may need to expand to accommodate new ways of understanding the world and conceptualizing the self.

Reflecting Assembled Subjectivity

The tension between narrative and database entails much greater stakes than a mere preference of form. Narrative and database correlate to different epistemological frameworks with which one makes sense of the world. Each of these organizational forms reflects its own logic and its own role for the subject. In choosing one or the other, what we are asking is whether the subject has a unique, autonomous voice that structures

his or her experience in a linear fashion, or whether we are assembled, networked selves whose identity is a response to a fluid and constantly changing stream of information.

In exploring a new form of storytelling, Delaume creates a *mise en abyme* of her cognitive map. To navigate the text is to move through the structure of Delaume's own mind. Thematically, the fragmented structure of the novel parallels Delaume's realization that her consciousness is permeated by outside influence. She struggles to distinguish her own private voice from the information network, documenting the way that the discourse of others integrates itself into her consciousness:

Le sujet est atteint de confusion. Il ne se contente plus de réutiliser inconsciemment les mots et la syntaxe de la télévision lorsqu'il en rapporte le discours. Désormais il semble *oublier* la source du message qu'il transmet à son tour. Non seulement le message est intégré et il se propage, soit par une mise en actes soit par une adhésion mentale; mais de plus il s'impose comme un savoir personnel, acquis depuis toujours à croire qu'il est inné. (96-97)

Information permeates the boundary of the private self until it becomes indistinguishable from one's own discourse. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Delaume's personal narrative is penetrated by external sources. The patchwork of lexicons in what the reader can assume to be her narrative (because it is not overtly cited like her other references) suggests that outside information is deeply embedded within her consciousness. A single sentence may well reflect a web of citations: "Parce que mon corps me lâche, c'est la trentaine, le tartre, les petits kystes à l'oeil, je dis les à cause de la repousse, deux à peine deux mois après l'opération. Toujours un papillome toujours d'un beau framboise toujours l'oeil et l'hémisphère gauche, le cortex préfrontal médian" (120). The technical language appears like a foreign presence in her discourse, leading the reader to question whether these words (or really *any* words) truly belong to Delaume.

This sense of otherness in one's own discourse leads to an estrangement from the self. Delaume's realization that her words are not her own is not an acknowledgment that language is an intertextual web of citations in the poststructuralist sense – it is the feeling that her consciousness is comprised of a patchwork of informational messages rather than being the product of a coherent, continuous self. The “assembled” framework of self-understanding gives limited agency to the individual and assumes a high level of determinism in one's behavior. For example, Delaume recalls participating in a survey in which she was asked whether she preferred Coca Cola or Pepsi. She later questions what inspired her choice and whether the answer came from her or an outside source: “Coca ou bien Pepsi j'avais pas trop d'avis, ma préférence j'en savais rien, j'ai dit Coca quand même, presque spontanément, tout cela est fort étrange” (33). If advertising is determining these choices, then Delaume can no longer claim to be authoring her own narrative; she is instead responding to cues in a mechanical fashion. There appears to be a blurring between the self and the outside world, a phenomenon that Baudrillard attributes to the figure of the schizo: “It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transience of the world which traverses him without obstacle. [...] He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence” (“The Ecstasy of Communication”, 133).

The result of this external intrusion into individual agency is the feeling that identity is no longer consistent and logical. This disruption of the individual's autonomy, a key characteristic of postmodernism, is intensified by the digital flow of information. N. Katherine Hayles argues that the Information Age is disrupting the coherency of the Cartesian subject and rendering the narrative self problematic. She characterizes

contemporary subjectivity by a tension between pattern and randomness, a dialectic that corresponds to the interpenetration of material forms by information, whether it be the DNA code that structures bodies or the transformation of consciousness by media such as the World Wide Web. Rather than seeing the self as a fixed or linear entity, Hayles suggests that cybernetic subjectivity is a fluid entity open to change. Literary works are adapting to these new conceptions of the self, producing what Hayles terms *information narratives*. She writes, “The characteristics of information narratives include [...] an emphasis on mutation and transformation as a central thematic for bodies within the text as well as for the bodies of texts” (43). Stability and continuity have been replaced by change and plasticity of forms.

J’habite foregrounds this textual and bodily transformation by charting Chloé Delaume’s absorption into the televisual medium. At the end of the novel, Delaume is no longer an independent embodied self but is instead an element in a reality TV show, having effectively lost her material body and mutated into a virtual televisual component. This metamorphosis correlates with the changing organizational structure of her text, whose forms include a letter to Gilles Deleuze, an affidavit filled out by Delaume’s partner Igor, a formal analysis of reality TV programs, and several numbered lists. The novel, like the self, is a fluid entity that can be endlessly reconstructed and reorganized.

As I will argue later, this pliability of the self and the textual space is a form of liberation for Delaume. She approaches her investigation of her physical and mental permeability with curiosity rather than fear – while Delaume is her own test subject, she is also the scientist who takes great interest in seeing the mind and body transformed. She describes the results of her experiment with scientific distance, attributing biological

explanations for her behavior: in a ten-point summary of her memory of commercials, she writes,

- “1. Lorsque je regarde la télévision, mon hippocampe est soumis à une répétition de messages.
2. Je m’efforce d’oublier les messages diffusés par la télévision.
3. Mon hippocampe fait donc son tri, ma mémoire à long terme ne se trouve pas encombrée.
4. Il arrive un moment où la répétition est telle que l’hippocampe range le message dans ma propre mémoire à long terme.”(74)

There is undoubtedly a fascination here with the ways that television is altering her biology. Delaume describes the process of her televisual transformation with great detail, slowly taking apart the subjective experience and drawing on extensive research to explain the mechanical functioning of her body as it intersects with media.

The textual permutations that accompany her physical change also make the narrative more dynamic and interesting. There is a playfulness in this rearranging of forms reminiscent of the literary experimentation of writers in the Oulipo group, notably Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style*. As Delaume herself states in a recent interview, “Mes lectures fondatrices, ce sont les pataphysiciens et les fins de siècles déadents, l’Oulipo, Queneau, le travail de la langue avec des contraintes...” (Zone Littéraire). Her work is obviously influenced by this literary tradition of invention and imaginative construction. Though it seems incongruous to insist on this aesthetic play in a novel centered around the theme of scientific management and information networks, Delaume does not lose sight of the fact that her novel constitutes a work of literature and thus engages in the creative assembly of language. She describes one of her favorites works, *L’Automne à Pékin*, “La langue joue en elle-même, pour elle-même, gagne en

indépendance et contrebalance un fond qui n'est pas très gai.” There is likewise a counter-balance in *J'habite* between the deterministic control exerted by the television and the openness of the narrative form. Delaume relishes in the creative recombinations and permutations that emphasize the poetic function in her message.

Delaume's creative reimagining of the novel as an open form whose structure can vary from chapter to chapter answers a question once posed by Fredric Jameson: what is the purpose of art once the unique, coherent self disappears? The notion of individuals being heterogeneous (at best) and incoherent (at worst) haunts postmodern theorists like Jameson and Baudrillard. The consequences of losing one's personal sense of autonomy vis-à-vis media and societal influence manifest themselves in the realm of art and literature, domains that have long been defined by the expression of the individual. Jameson laments what he sees as the disappearance of the distinct voice amid the schizophrenic media culture of late capitalism and its ensuing repercussions in the expressive arts. Jameson writes,

What we have to retain from all this is rather an aesthetic dilemma: because if the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing. What is clear is merely that the older models – Picasso, Proust, T.S. Eliot – do not work any more (or are positively harmful), since nobody has that kind of unique private world and style to express any longer. (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, 17)

Why bother to write or create art if one no longer has a distinct point of view? The heavy use of intertextual references in Delaume's novel suggests that the self reflected in modernist art has been replaced by a montage of voices. But as Jameson would ask, is it still literature if the author no longer has an autonomous identity to present through his or her writing?

Though the private world is certainly a questionable concept in the Information Age, the function of art and literature does not die along with the Cartesian subject. Delaume's novel suggests the creative possibilities opened by these new forms of assembled subjectivity. While art may no longer be expressing a unique self, it continues to play an important role in helping us to understand the new ways of being in the world. *J'habite* expresses through language the cognitive shifts brought about by information media, and it does so by calling into question many of the literary tenets that characterized the modernist writing celebrated in Jameson's critique. While Jameson is correct in pointing out that the old aesthetic conventions may no longer be appropriate to the contemporary cultural context, it is important to recognize that other forms of representation take their stead.

Autofiction Without a Self

In addition to creating hybrid forms of narrative that integrate the fluidity of the database and an expanded and more overt intertextuality, Delaume asks her reader to rethink the genre of autofiction (as well as other biographical forms) in order to more authentically represent networked subjectivity. If there is no longer a unique, continuous, coherent self, then what does it mean to author a self-reflective work? How does one write the self when the self is actually written by others? As Delaume prophetically warns the reader at the end of her novel, "La fiction collective existe: c'est en elle que vous habitez. L'Ogre y aura toujours raison puisqu'il en écrit les chapitres. Je redoute que déjà vous tous ne soyez plus qu'une poignée de caractères dans son livre de contes" (154). The question of whether the individual is in fact author of his or her self-narrative is brought to the forefront by this particular autofictional work. Is Delaume the product

of her own writing, or merely a character in the Ogre's story?

Autofiction has generally acquired the reputation of being narcissistic, what Frédéric Beigbeder defines as “des romans autobiographiques où l’auteur utilise son nombril pour créer de la fiction” (*Beigbeder et ses Doubles*, 13). Beigbeder and Amélie Nothomb's autofictional works retell their own personal life narratives, offering the reader an opportunity to gain an insight into the lives of these literary celebrities. There is a desire in autofiction to explain the self to the public and to explore one's own inner world. In explaining the term that he coined, Serge Doubrovsky alludes to Freud and the construction of fictional narratives in order to better understand one's personality. He writes, “L'autofiction, c'est sans doute là qu'elle se loge: image de soi au miroir analytique [...]” (*Autobiographiques*, 77). Autofiction, according to Doubrovsky, serves above all to give an accurate representation of the self; the fictional, imaginative aspect of the text reflects an identity that is always in flux, always constructed: “Le sens d'une vie n'existe nulle part, n'existe pas. Il n'est pas à découvrir, mais à inventer, non de toutes pièces, mais de toutes traces: il est à *construire*”.

Perhaps it is this construction inherent to autofiction that has made the genre so popular among French novelists in the last few decades. The ability to write the self, to literally create an identity through writing, seems particularly well suited to a post-Cartesian age where the self is seen as a component in a network that is constantly shifting and transforming. The productive aspect of autofiction is certainly what attracts Chloé Delaume, who sees the distinction between life and literature as porous: to invent the self in language is to create a new way of being in the world. She writes, “J'use de la fiction pour construire reconstruire le passé le présent parce que je veux rester maître de

mon destin” (*La Règle*, 81).

If autofiction presents this empowering potential to re-write the self, then what comes as a surprise is how little of a self exists in Delaume’s writing. The narrative of *J’habite*, after all, is that of a self who is subsumed by information, one who disappears from the real world and becomes but an element in a reality TV show. Her personal narrative is absorbed by the collective fiction written by the televisual “Ogre”, and Delaume begins to doubt whether she ever had an identity distinct from the messages she absorbed through media.

Delaume goes to great lengths to erase her identity from this work, objectifying herself as “un sujet d’étude” whose personal history is subservient to the literary and physical experiment enacted in the novel. She occasionally refers to herself in the third person, effectively creating a scientific, observational distance in what is conventionally seen as an intimate reflection. Delaume strives to present herself to her readers as she (and they) are seen by the researchers of the television industry: subjects to be transformed and acted upon.

A reader attracted to this autofictional work by the promise of learning more about the personal history or intimate thoughts of the author would be disappointed. While Delaume’s earlier novel *Le Cri du sablier* revealed private memories from her family history, *J’habite* tells little in terms of her life story. Delaume in fact seems determined to avoid telling a story, and she declares early in the novel, “Raconter je crois bien que je n’aime pas ça du tout, à moi-même encore moins, vraiment, non, ça ne m’amuse pas” (42). The purpose of her work is purely scientific and literary: to document what occurs during televisual immersion, and to present it as an aesthetic

experience for her reader.

The loss of self is evident even in Delaume's attitude toward language. Her academic interest in word choice and syntax leads her to alienate the very words that she uses. Delaume estranges her language from her self, highlighting the way her discourse reflects external voices rather than her own psychological truth. In *J'habite*, her language seems to belong to no one other than *Le Petit Robert*, which she cites repeatedly. Delaume's words are foreign entities that she regards with critical distance, reflections of her research and textual exposure. Thus she aborts the development of her thought to consider the word she uses to express it: "Elle ment plus qu'elle respire, mais elle est émouvante. C'est un mot écoeurant, il lui convenait pas mal je crois qu'attachante serait plus adapté" (85). Delaume does not quite feel at home in her own words, making it clear that language is another element of the cultural network of which she is a product rather than a producer.

At times she selects from various registers, creating a poetic quality to her discourse that emphasizes the language at the expense of its *habitus*: "Il serait donc une autre fois, mais alors vraiment différente, la télévision. La mienne et puis la vôtre. Celle où mon corps figure et mon cerveau croupit. Celle où les engelures qui ceignent vos synapses s'épanouissent aux divans profonds sous la curée" (49). Despite the autobiographical form of the novel, the language is depersonalized, a foreign entity that draws attention to its own independent existence. Much of her discourse consists of "found" phrases that are clearly pulled from other sources, her language a reflection of the information network.

If we are all but intersections of data, then writing a personal narrative in one's own words become a suspicious act, to use a word made famous in literary theory by Nathalie Sarraute (*L'Ère du soupçon*, 1950).¹⁰ It seems that every historical and cultural period casts doubt on generic conventions. There comes a moment when the formal aspects of art and literature become incompatible with what a particular public deems authentic. While Sarraute called into question the use of character and psychology in the novel, deeming them to be obvious constructs of a literary imagination parading as elements of realism, Delaume appears to extend this critique to the conventions of autobiographical genres.¹¹ The coherent, singular identity is made inauthentic by the fact that human beings are, like Delaume's text, assembled through various networks of information.

The act of introspection, for Delaume, unearths a plethora of outside voices, questioning whether a real self exists among the many discourses that act upon the individual. *J'habite* thus comprises a subversion of the conventional representation of selfhood in autobiographical novels; rather than bringing forth a deeper understanding of the unique individual (as many autobiographical works arguably do), *J'habite* dissolves the self amid the voices of others. The act of turning inward brings the narrator back out to the mediatized environment shaping her thoughts and actions.

¹⁰ Given that Delaume has publicly declared her affinity for the *Nouveau roman* and its experimental fictions, the parallel between her textual innovation and that of Sarraute seems appropriate despite their temporal separation.

¹¹ It is worthwhile to note that Sarraute's own autobiography, *Enfance*, subverted conventional notions of selfhood by creating a dialogue between two speakers: one recalling Sarraute's memories of childhood, the other casting doubt on the authenticity of these memories and their narrative construction.

This loss of self, however, brings a potential for creating new forms of virtual selfhood. The ability to write the self is what attracts Delaume to the genre of autofiction; the virtualization of identity through electronic media allows her to extend this project to other avenues. Delaume is famous for re-writing her identity in her work, referring to herself as “une personnage de fiction” and seeing the literary text as a means of transforming subjectivity. For her novel *Corpus Simsi*, Delaume created an avatar of herself available for download, which enabled readers to invent their own experiences in the narrative of “Chloé Delaume”. As Delaume writes, “Les joueurs de Sims peuvent m’intégrer à leur partie, me jouer, m’incarner à leur tour. Plus de deux cents personnes se procurent mon personnage, certains m’envoient des captures d’écran, comme traces de mon intégration à leurs propres fictions” (*La Règle*, 87). Like the cyborgs described by Donna Haraway whose hybridity shattered epistemological categories of gender, race, nationality, and sexuality, Delaume’s virtual, multiple selves allow her to explore creative possibilities in her narrative.

It is intriguing that the loss of control associated with becoming an avatar in someone else’s game, whether it be *Sims* or the information network in *J’habite*, provides a sense of liberation. Perhaps Delaume’s creative approach to what could easily be construed as a sci-fi nightmare marks a resigned acceptance of network intrusion: while it is fruitless to fight against the penetration of information, one may as well enjoy the experience of being transformed and redefined. It is also possible that her enthusiastic attitude toward these different forms of selfhood mark a change in values – the Cartesian self was in many ways limited by comparison to the fluid virtual self. There is a freedom in surpassing the (often oppressive) limitations of the embodied, historicized, gendered

self, a point that has been highlighted by feminist critiques of humanism (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 288).

Delaume's openness to integrating new media into her work and embracing the experiences available through virtuality lead me to wonder whether this new multi-media platform is a harbinger of the novel's future. Is this experimental work, which seeks to represent contemporary subjectivity by playing with and challenging literary conventions, somehow better adapted to reading practices in the twenty-first century than traditional forms of narrative? In what ways does Delaume both assimilate and challenge the way that electronic media conditions readers to view the text? The culturally adaptive form of Delaume's work does not prevent her from also stretching the reader's habitual way of interacting with the text.

Adapting to and Challenging Reading Practices in the Digital Age

The non-linear, composite structure in *J'habite* is strikingly evocative of the hypertext. Using associative logic to "link" from one reference to the next and composing narrative by opening various "windows" of text is now a familiar way of writing on the Internet. *J'habite* appears to cater to this distinct form of interacting with the text. Delaume's ideal reader is an expert in multitasking: he or she is asked to alternate between distinct discourses while following the thread of the narrative, to leave behind the authorial voice and then return to it after a brief interruption from another source. Delaume seems to address a reader who is accustomed to switching quickly between texts and reading fragments rather than entire works.

The choice to incorporate this sort of writing practice into the novel again engages the theme of information. Hypertextual reading and writing practices are a response to

enormous quantities of data that require quick processing. The piecemeal, fragmented style of dealing with text is a way to cover as much ground as possible in a limited framework of space and time. As Katherine Hayles writes in *How We Think*, “Hyper reading, which includes skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts, is a strategic response to an information-intensive environment, aiming to conserve attention by quickly identifying relevant information, so that only relatively few portions of a given text are actually read” (12). In *J’habite*, Delaume appears to imitate the hyper reading process, selecting from her research documents and presenting the reader with the most significant excerpts. The reader of this novel is exposed to dozens of documents within the short space of the work.

Delaume’s use of this hypertextual structure is intriguing because so often hyper reading and its fragmented style of consuming text is seen as superficial and de-contextualized. The digital way of reading is associated with a loss of meaning: readers skim through the text, jumping from one source to the next, following hyperlinks without much concern for authority and authorship, turning reading into a form of distraction rather than an engaged practice. Scholars of literature oppose hyper-reading to the close reading that has for decades defined the academically appropriate way of digesting narrative. Paying attention to the rhetorical structure and style of a passage demands a higher degree of focus, and this sort of attention is no longer suited to a mediascape where users are asked to filter large quantities of content.

For Delaume, however, the fragmented way of constructing her novel requires focused attention – the writing is challenging, producing a dense text whose fragments appeal to an academic readership. Delaume’s references to theorists such as Baudrillard

and Deleuze suggest that she is not addressing a casual reader from among the general population. While speed and media distraction are the primary motivators for hyper reading on the Internet, glossing over the text of this particular novel would only result in confusion. While she borrows from the logic of the hypertext, Delaume wants her reader to process her work slowly.

It is not easy to parse one's way through the impenetrable scientific jargon that marks many of the cited documents: "[...] la technique du patch-clamp pour explorer, sur des tranches de cerveau, des mécanismes de l'empreinte mnésique laissée par des déshydratations extra-cellulaires ou par des imprégnations par les minéralocorticoïdes" (19). There is a focus on language here that defies the skimming typical of hyper-reading. In fact, Delaume's preference for challenging and unusual words represents her stand against the very limited vocabulary of popular media. Her aim is to save words from extinction:

Quand un mot n'est plus prononcé, plus articulé par personne, il finit par s'éteindre, faute de souffle et de sang. Il y en a beaucoup, vraiment énormément, qui décèdent tous les ans. C'est de la faute de l'Ogre, ses gencives sont trop mauves, il redoute les chausse-trappes et la moindre écorchure, il lui faut des mots pré-mâchés standard et une syntaxe de chyme tiède, il faut que la langue fonde mais ne soit pas trop cuite, ce ragoût compte bien sûr parmi ses favoris. (80)

Delaume's writing goes against this current of simplified, easily-digestible language. Delaume is known for being an aficionado of the dictionary, and her writing encourages the reader to refer to it as well.

Delaume thus adapts her writing to the Information Age but also challenges its reading practices. Her novels strive to resuscitate the aesthetic experience of language that is so often overlooked in digital communication. The fact that Delaume has selected excerpts of her sources is not a way to cut down the reader's energy; instead, abridging

her references draws attention to their status as *texts* in addition to being articles of information. Fragmentation concentrates the reader's attention – we are not asked to deal with endless paragraphs but rather focused snippets. The additional spaces between paragraphs isolate the bits of text in a way that disrupts the flow of reading, but that also allows for the reader to digest the bit, pause to reflect, and only then continue to the next section.

J'habite interrogates information through both the poetic and referential function (to use Jakobson's terminology). Her goal is not merely to cite the documents as information, but also to repurpose them in her intertextual collage, to use the discourse of scientific authorities to create a claustrophobic and paranoid aesthetic experience. As Delaume herself states in an interview, "Je n'ai aucune envie que le lecteur passe 'un bon moment' lorsqu'il a un de mes ouvrages entre les mains. Je veux qu'il soit déstabilisé, qu'il saisisse que la langue permet d'éprouver des émotions esthétiques violentes, qu'il soit confronté très concrètement à une expérience de lecture. Pas à une chouette histoire qui lui change les idées" (*Revue critique*, 130). Her emphasis is not on the content of the documents, but rather their ability to act on the reader's psyche, to function as *texts* in the Barthesian sense: subverting genres, resisting closure, a function of network rather than a single voice, demanding that the reader produce and play with the meaning rather than consume it passively ("From Work to Text").

Delaume wants to disrupt the reader's sense of stability and frustrate attempts at easy or quick reading. She recognizes that her style is experimental and refers to her writing as working in a laboratory (*La Règle du Je*, 37). The question remains as to whether this sort of writing heralds a new form for the novel that will become more

common as reading strategies evolve in the Information Age. Will novels increasingly cater to an elite group of readers with the academic background necessary to understand the intertextual references and language of challenging work? In contrast to the other novels discussed in this study, *J'habite* is least accessible to the general reading public. Rather than widening her appeal (a survival strategy apparently embraced by our other novelists), Delaume chooses to cater to a small niche of serious readers. This forward-thinking novel seems to consider itself a specialized form of expression intended for a select audience.

This well-read group will also need to be fairly comfortable accessing the online content intended to accompany the novel. The potential to extend the fictional experience on the web – whether through archived photos or videos, blogs, chats with the authors, etc. – is where many readers believe that the novel is headed. Alas, the twelve performances accompanying the text of *J'habite* are currently not available on Delaume's website. This is an unfortunate occurrence, though the text is certainly able to stand alone without these online supplements. One might imagine that a future e-book edition of *J'habite* might have these performances integrated into the text as hyperlinks. The very notion of providing online material to accompany the text suggests that Delaume is thinking ahead to how authorship might evolve in the coming years: the crafting of a novel may well involve skills that surpass the textual medium. Novelists may be expected to integrate performances, video clips, music, and games into their work, a notion that could either demand greater digital expertise from the writer or encourage collaboration between novelists, web page designers, and other artists. This sort of future

will also require a savvy readership that knows how to make sense of these various multimedia elements and put them into conversation with the written text.

J'habite proposes that the novel embrace adaptation and experimentation as a survival strategy. Rather than opposing the text to new media, Delaume welcomes television and digital information as an opportunity for the novel to rethink its formal conventions. Among the various strategies discussed thus far (opposition, contestation, complicity), this one seems most vibrant and exciting. The novel is no longer on the sidelines of media culture, lamenting the accompanying transformations in language, habits, values, and its lack of viability within them. Instead, the novel is at the forefront of digital change, imagining new forms of textuality and subjectivity. The relationship in this work between the novel and media culture seems collaborative, a sign that writers are accepting the evolution of their cultural context and making sure that their work plays an active role in them.

Conclusion

In her commentary on the function of literature, Delaume stresses that literature is above all an aesthetic endeavor. In *La Règle du Je*, she supports this notion with a definition from *Le Petit Robert*: “Littérature: Les oeuvres écrites, dans la mesure où elles portent la marque de préoccupations esthétiques” (65). Delaume has repeatedly stated that her writing is less concerned with content than it is with form, arguing that it is not her role to tell stories: “ce qui importe c’est la langue certainement pas l’histoire” (65).

L’art pour l’art and the formalistic experimentation of the *Nouveau roman* have arguably fallen out of fashion. Despite Delaume’s insistence on aesthetics, the great bulk of bestselling novels are predominantly driven by storytelling. As Michel Houellebecq

declares in *Interventions* 2, “La première – et pratiquement la seule – condition d’un bon style, c’est d’avoir quelque chose à dire” (153). Delaume’s own novel is also, perhaps in spite of her best intentions, motivated by a message, an awareness of the effects of the external world on the private consciousness of the individual. In my analysis of her novel, the aesthetic preoccupations are all prompted by the need to express the new form of subjectivity that results from media interference. It would be difficult to make sense of Delaume’s language if it weren’t telling a story.

It could be her lack of concern for the relationship between art and its extradiegetic context that explains why Delaume does not address how literature is to remain relevant in an increasingly mediatized culture. She does not seem anxious about the novel’s future; *J’habite* targets a select readership, and perhaps this niche market of academic readers is unlikely to abandon books in favor of television. Or perhaps integrating the novel within the mediascape rather than alienating it suggests that literature is not in an embattled state but rather is an active player in the changes affecting contemporary society. Nothomb’s compromised satire likewise emphasizes literature’s assimilation in the cultural current, which may contribute to her confidence that the novel does not necessarily need to be defended against competition from other media.

Neither Nothomb nor Delaume fights for the survival of the novel – they make no case as to how literature is unique or essential vis-à-vis other media. The Anxiety of Obsolescence does not manifest itself in their novels, and so there is no reason for them to justify continuing to read literature. Unlike Toussaint, Beigbeder, or Y.B., they do not claim that literature matters because it affects our sense of community, or that it motivates us to take action in our everyday lives to change the world. It is hard to say

which of these positions is more compelling – arguing for the ethical and political significance of literature inspires an obligation to preserve it. On the other hand, it also isolates it from the popular culture and gives it a paternalistic or snobbish air, a trait caricatured in Toussaint’s academic protagonist or Bala’s intellectual demeanor in *Allah superstar*. Ideally, literature should attract readers not because it is good for them, but because the act of reading is pleasurable, thought-provoking, and exciting. Making literature viable in the mediascape will require convincing the public that its value is self-evident.

Conclusion

It has been my intention to show how the French novel is refashioning itself in response to television. The reactions to television indicate both a tendency to distinguish the novel from television by highlighting qualities specific to the novelistic genre, and borrowing from the language and structure of television to better adapt to a new cultural context that is in many ways permeated and defined by television. The pressure to compete with a rival medium leads the novel to ask how literary representation is unique and what it can contribute to a rapidly evolving world. The crisis created by the popularity of visual media has created an opportunity for the novel to rebrand itself and to redefine the purpose it serves for today's readers.

The question of relevance in particular has inspired several compelling arguments in favor of why reading matters, and why it matters even more now that visual media filter so much of human experience. Toussaint set the aesthetic properties inherent in the novelistic genre against a televisual horizon of expectations. The eccentricity of the novel as a slow medium serves as an antidote to the deadening effects of televisual exposure. Beigbeder stresses the honesty of the novel as a form free from commercial sponsorship. For Y.B., the novel presents views that are not expressed through popular media, its form allowing for contradiction and complexity that questions the simplistic views featured on sound bites. Defining the novel against television elucidates its unique way of speaking, an attribute of its lengthy form and singularity of expression. The novel grows in importance because its process of representation is increasingly rare and perhaps endangered. The novel's ability to capture stillness, to expound at length on a complex issue in dialogic fashion, to portray subjectivity or elucidate the changing status of

language are not suddenly worthless assets; they are, on the contrary, essential for a media culture that neglects these qualities.

By presenting the novel as a distinct form of representation, these works draw attention to the status of media *qua* media, both in their critique of television and in their own self-reflection. Examining the representational structure of television leads the novel to consider its own means of making sense of the world. Novelists responding to televisual representation thus exaggerate the literary medium in their works, drawing attention to the specific qualities that make written fiction distinct from visual representation and using hypermediation to highlight their use of language and narrative. Toussaint's exaggerated literary style, Beigbeder's grammatical chapter headings (*je, tu, il, etc*), Delaume's search for unusual words, all put into relief the fact that the literary work is not a transparent window onto reality but rather a fictional construction. The reader is conscious that he or she is engaging with the written word while reading a text that also engages the mediatization of television. The works strive for a meta-analysis of the way that different forms of representation act upon the consumer/viewer/reader.

This is important in two respects: first, it shows the advantage for the novel in engaging with another medium. Confronting television creates a sense of alterity within the novel that allows it to see itself from the perspective of an outsider and ask what it has to offer an audience whose experience is largely filtered via the television screen. How can the novel fit into a televisual mediascape? What aspects of televised representation can the novel contest or supplement? What is being neglected or forgotten in the preference for visual and virtual experience, and how can the novel revive it? These questions broaden literature's focus and invite the novel to dialogue with the real world,

addressing a reader's sense of politics, identity, and aesthetic tastes. Freud's comparison between artists and daydreamers whose fantastic play is opposed to reality does not ring true here ("Creative Writers and Daydreaming") – these novelists are not retreating into a fanciful world of their own but are instead thinking about how to bring their writing into the reader's reality. Writing becomes less of an isolated activity and more immersed in the extra-textual world, directly communicating with the needs and conflicts of its social context. Because television is a cultural and economic apparatus that engages with mainstream ideologies, capitalism, globalization, consumerism, and social mores, to think about television is to think about the systems in which it is embedded. Differentiating the novel from television entails thinking broadly about how the novel fits into these larger systems and how it can more actively engage its broader historical setting.

Second, raising the reader's awareness of representational media, both literary and televisual, creates a critical distance between the individual and the various forms of representation that define his or her daily experience. Because our connection to the world is increasingly defined by screens and images, it is worthwhile to step back and interrogate just how these media act upon our psyches. Each of the works in this study acknowledges that television is ubiquitous and environmental. The power of television is in many ways imperceptible because it feels so normal to have it turned on. For many households, television is another guest at dinner, a companion in the evenings, or background noise during the day. As Marshall McLuhan famously declared, "the medium is the message", and yet that message is lost when data flows predominantly from a single imperceptible source. To make the experience of watching television feel strange and unfamiliar, another medium must confront it, describe it from the outside,

and make visible a part of life that has become eerily natural. The novel is in a particularly apt position to provide this defamiliarization because it is so inherently different from television. Audiences cannot acknowledge the speed of television until they enter a much slower medium; they cannot perceive the ethics of spectacle until they leave it behind. The novel is essential as an outside observer to our media-driven lives.

At the same time, the novel cannot be a perfect stranger; writers are asking how to speak the language of televisual society and how to put televisual consciousness on display. The streams of logos in *99 francs*, the narrative flow in *Allah superstar*, the intertextual collage in *J'habite* and even the detached observation in *Acide sulfurique* point to new forms of capturing the changes in perception and sense-making in the televisual age. How does televisual conditioning lead us to think differently, to experience time according to a different rhythm, to structure our memories and our sense of self through the lens of media? Representing televisual consciousness through the written word is a powerful way of understanding how a medium alters our epistemological frameworks. As the German literature expert Geoffrey Winthrop-Young wrote of Franz Kafka, “while it may not take much to describe streetcars, it takes a lot to describe a world in which streetcars make sense; and it takes genius to depict faithfully how streetcars are changing the people who use them” (“Magic Media Mountain”, 49). There is an art to describing how human beings are being changed by their technology, and the novel is in an advantageous place to represent these cognitive and behavioral transformations given its focus on subjectivity, consciousness, and communication.

Many of the themes featured in these narratives have already been presented in theoretical texts; throughout this study I have drawn attention to the conscious or

unconscious influence of thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Pierre Bourdieu. And yet the way that the novel brings these themes to life, integrates them into stories that are personal and salient, and connects them to the reader's own experience speaks to the novel's exceptional way of representing ideas. Kamel's narrative asks the reader to identify with media exclusion, to both think about an issue and experience it through the story of an Other. Toussaint's protagonist creates the sensation of slowness for the reader, immersing him or her in the lengthy and leisurely style of prose that alludes to a previous, pre-televisual era. The novel performs the theory, makes it visceral, uncomfortable, and memorable.

The performance of televisual consciousness also anchors these novels in their own time. Their specific use of language speaks not to an eternal readership but one that can relate to the contemporaneous references to popular culture or the patterned form of sense-making. It would be questionable, for instance, whether readers fifty years ago could comprehend Kamel's rambling, collage-style monologue. Fifty years into the future, readers may not have the contextual knowledge to grasp the irony of *La Télévision*. Perhaps the present-mindedness of these works speaks to the novel's uncertain future: why write a timeless classic when the novel's readership is declining? Hopefully it also reflects the urgency of these works to address their own historical moment. Some of the more engaged novels, such as *99 francs* and *Allah superstar*, seek to enact immediate change in their readers' thoughts and behavior. They speak to a contemporaneous readership that will identify with their topics and transform the text into real-world action.

It has been my intention to demonstrate a variety of responses to television rather than argue for a monolithic theory. The choice to present a diversity of novelistic approaches reflects the current landscape in French literature, where there is no grand movement akin to *Tel Quel* or the *OuLiPo*. The writers defining the novel are not members of a group but rather individuals, each with his or her own idea of how best to position the novel in televisual society. Each one highlights a different aspect of the novel, whether it be its aesthetic form or ability to contest the narratives of mainstream media. There are many ways for the novel to contribute to its televisual context, and French novelists are engaging a plurality of survival strategies.

This suggests many more survival strategies that are awaiting further research. Five novels is a rather small sample size, and only a small reflection of the many ways that novelists are working to remain current in a mediascape that threatens their viability. Examining a larger body of works would also allow for analysis of broader trends: has there been a decline in the Anxiety of Obsolescence over the past few decades? Do marginalized writers indeed see the television differently, as Fitzpatrick contends?

In addition to looking at television, there are several other media that lend themselves to this sort of investigation, though television is unique in its competition with the written word. It would seem that the Internet, which allows novelists to supplement their works with additional online material and advertise their latest books via fan-based websites, would be more of a help than a hindrance. Likewise for the computer, which allows writers to explore new ways of arranging text. The French writer François Bon, for example, admits to typing with his eyes closed, enabling him to escape the outside

world and immerse himself in his own imagination (*Tumulte*, 112). New media are not necessarily adversaries for the novel, but they are influencing writing in radical ways.

It is my hope that the reader is more acutely aware of the way that technology shapes writing, and the novel in particular. The novel is not a relic from the past, a static form that has remained the same since its origins. It is attentive to its contemporary society and evolving much like the language that constitutes its raw material. When a novelist presents a new way of structuring the text, it is worthwhile to ask what may have prompted this ingenuity, or what it might be reacting to. The novel situates itself in a dynamic environment in which the appearance of a new medium reshapes the use and purpose of all the existing media. The rapid evolution of today's media environment suggests that new rivals will inevitably come to challenge the novel's purpose and status. The current trend in technology indicates that the novel may need to adapt to a more mobile, fragmented style of consumption (in the form of handheld devices) and find ways of presenting texts as media events that inspire virtual discussion via Twitter and fan websites. The future of technology is unforeseeable, leaving the novel in a precarious and dynamic place.

While I have selected works that overtly acknowledge television, the idea that writers are reacting to their mediatized context is worthwhile to consider in even non-televisual novels. Given the accelerated pace of hypermodern life, for instance, many writers are asking how to adapt the flow of their text to represent the rapid movement of their social context. Language is absorbing the influence of modern media as well, challenging the idea of timeless works and instead anchoring novels in their present moment. The very dynamic of human relationships is also undergoing mediatized

transformation as people communicate via screens, altering the nature of how novels represent dialogue and perception. Whether as subtext, context, or acknowledged theme, media is present in any work that speaks to and of its contemporary moment.

The constantly changing media landscape suggests that the crisis facing the novel is here to stay. Some critics argue that the French novel is in a perpetual state of crisis (Bessard-Banquy, 261), and that the panic surrounding the survival of the novel is by now a banal occurrence. Ruth Cruickshank suggests that the novel may be responding to crisis narratives present in other realms of intellectual and political life, and that these crises have been constant throughout the twentieth century: “A ‘long twentieth century’ of crisis thinking can be traced spanning Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Saussure, the Frankfurt School, materialist feminism, structuralism, poststructuralism, difference feminism, discourses labeled as postmodern, and those which seek to counter them” (4). It is very likely that the twenty-first century will continue this ongoing stream of crisis, leaving the novel in a position of instability as it confronts an uncertain epistemological, political, and literary future.

And yet the novel is perfectly well equipped to deal with this uncertainty, and in fact thrives in conditions of indeterminacy. As Bakhtin writes in his essay “Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel”, “The novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present. The novelist is drawn toward everything that is not yet completed” (27). For Bakhtin, the desire to capture the present moment in all its precariousness is the very definition of what the novel does. The current moment provides an ideal place for the novel to make its home, exploring the ways that subjectivity and language are being reconfigured by new technology. The

acceleration of history makes the present moment all the more tenuous, giving the novel much to grapple with as it strives to make sense of a rapidly changing and unstable world.

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